
Pro Rege

Volume 46
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue* 2017

Article 21

December 2017

Epiphanies

Bill Elgersma
Dordt College, bill.elgersma@dordt.edu

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Recommended Citation

Elgersma, Bill (2017) "Epiphanies," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 46: No. 2, 29 - 34.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol46/iss2/21

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Epiphanies

Bill Elgersma

The conversation at the kitchen table tonight is about as average as it is every night. You ask the kids how school went, and the older two answer the way they always do, “good.” The school could have been struck by a meteor and disappeared from the face of the earth, and the description would still be “good,” while the youngest goes into a lengthy explanation of Theodore’s inability to pass the garbage can after lunch without vomiting. He is something of a “unapuker”—sort of a puke-and-run kind of guy. She tells you this has been happening for two weeks now, and the teachers finally figured out who it is. But the highlight of the conversation is when your monosyllabic, 16-year-old son tells you he passed his driver’s test and wants to know if he can take the car to the game tonight. Your wife says “No” immediately, but you are trying to be objective about this. Being 16 creates an allergy to parents, and you are trying to find a vaccine.

The ensuing conversation includes a discussion about responsibility and the question of why would we let him get his license if we aren’t going to let him drive, so in the end, we consent. Not 15 seconds later, your youngest child asks if she can go with him. You hesitate briefly—wondering in your most morbid thoughts if you can handle the loss of two of your children should a car crash happen—but again you agree—with a further discussion about responsibility. He had stopped listening after yes. It is only when you hear the sirens leave town later that evening, as you are lying in bed and your children are not home, that you really wonder about your decision. You turn to your wife and you ask her if she is prepared for the police at the door, telling you two of your children are dead. This is certainly not a glass half-full moment. And in that moment you also flash back to an earlier place in time when you were the child, not the parent, and

for the first time you finally understand why your mother took exception to your decision at that age. While you thought it was no big deal, her thoughts must have been much like mine: how do you think anything but the worst when your child is late and the sirens wail down Highway 75?

When you are sixteen, you know everything. You just know it. You survived early adolescence where you thought you knew it all, weathered the disasters—like when Brenda Post told you she really liked you, and then you found out she said the same thing to Chris Young, and you were crushed for the better part of a month when everyone except you knew that they were necking in the dug-out at the community center when you were in grade 8—even if you weren’t quite sure what necking was. But you came out relatively unscarred. The ones you carry are the armor that allows you to climb the upper branches of the brilliance tree. Teachers, school, friends, siblings, parents—pyssh. You think you are smarter than all of them. Your answers come quickly, and you are not afraid to share them. You speak with authority on subjects you know nothing about. As a matter of fact, mostly you just can’t shut up because the world needs—no, demands—your knowledge.

The problem with being the genius of the universe is when you are not. Mostly those moments happen when you least expect them, and you are left wallowing in the abyss of your pretension. At this point, your parents, not recognizing the evolution of genius, have little sympathy for the flotsam and jetsam that trails behind you as you navigate the murky waters of emerging adulthood, and they ground you for extended periods of time—sometimes months.

You don’t care. Annette DeVries is hot—really hot, like smoking hot—and you know that you and the fellow citizens of your dweebdom have no chance with her. Even if you didn’t know her

name at the time, you have thought about her for almost a year, and you can name the exact day it started. When the highschool hosted grade 8 day, there she was, and you knew right then you were in love. Your heart scrunched within your boney chest; no words, not one, found its way out of your mouth as you gazed at her floating across the gym floor oblivious to your existence. You began to sweat profusely; even your palms were wet, leaving wet marks on the khaki pants your mother made you wear instead of the blue jeans you wanted. The friends you were hanging out with saw your face as you tracked her with your eyes and immediately began pushing you around and heckling the way a dweeb posse does. You know you know nothing about girls and neither do they, so between the bunch of you, you look like the nerdherd 2.0 and she the princess of another universe.

Tragically and thankfully Annette never noticed you, and by the time fall had arrived, you have at least two hairs on your chest and the promise that one day your mustache might actually come in as whiskers instead of fuzz. Your voice has begun to change, and it doesn't crack as often. Your ears and your nose are still too big, as are your feet, and your awkwardness is apparent as you lunge rather than walk down the hall, but you are closer to having all parts of your body as friends working for a common cause—you . . . You mother, when talking to her complaining sister, calls it survival. "All those boys can do at this age is exist," she says, attempting to placate Auntie Dee because your cousin is as whacked as you and she's begging for advice. Survival. You spend the year ignoring Annette as part of your plan to attract her to you. At sixteen, nothing says I love you like avoidance. And you are good at it.

The change occurs in Grade 10. You sit behind her in French class, mostly in the back of the room, and you never hear much from Mademoiselle LeBlanc. You spend the majority of your time examining the back of Annette's head and neck while leaning forward to breathe the fragrance in her hair. In today's world that is called stalking and creepy, but back in Grade 10, you call it love—unfettered attention and dedication to her. When LeBlanc calls on you, you stammer. The only words you know are "J'iame Annette," and that you only mumble to your pillow because you lack the courage to profess your undying love to her. The pillow

is getting pretty good though. So, as you stutter to answer, Annette turns around and looks at you, and you melt. Your face turns red and you feel the sweat begin to pour. She whispers the answer, but you are so entranced with the shape of her lips, you fail to hear her. All you can think about is kissing those lips, and you don't even know how to kiss; you have never kissed anyone except your mom, and that's just gross to think about in the context of Annette. You know you wouldn't know which way to turn your head or how to pucker your lips, but you are sure you could get it done. However, at the moment it is LeBlanc and not Annette, and you have nothing except the fragrance of flowers cancelling the synapse in your brain.

After class, Mademoiselle LeBlanc stops you to talk about your lack of concentration, then lets you go. You slink out of the room, embarrassed because of the distraction—and the smirk on her face tells you Leblanc knows why you are not concentrating—and Annette is waiting outside the door. Her books are in her arms as she stands against the wall, and as you exit out of the door, eyes to the floor, she calls your name. Calls your name! Poof! Never mind going down in flames, the zero you are going to receive for lack of concentration. Annette DeVries knows your name. The struggle is you have never talked to her, that is, never when she could actually hear you. The conversations you have had by yourself when you are on the bridge down by the creek don't count because she is not there. In that place you carry on great conversations: you talk about your careers and your children and the holidays you are going to take. But in real time, beside the door to LeBlanc's room, Annette DeVries may as well be speaking a foreign language because you have no words—smoking hot has a language that dweeb receptors cannot hear and dweeb brains cannot decipher.

When you finally get over the fact that she has waited for you, you squeak a "Hi." A "Hi." And then you cringe. It's all you have. You feel your heart fall, and you can smell smoke. This is crash and burn. Your friends—the dweeb brigade—are in front of the grade-ten lockers, half a hallway away, making dweeb gestures behind her back. You see them locked in embraces with one another, feigning kisses, and you are mortified that she might witness this and shut you out forever, but you cannot stop them for fear that she notices.

So you face her, complexion a fever-red, and you run around your brain trying to remember how to communicate like a human being.

You mumble, "Thanks for waiting."

Her voice twinkles when she answers, "That's okay. LeBlanc is a bit of a beast."

And you mutter, "That's for sure," while savoring every inflection. You want to say, "I love you." You want to say, "marry me." You want to say anything that will make a difference, but in dismay you think, *all I have got is "that is for sure"*? and you hate yourself the way that Prufrock guy does in that stupid lovesong poem you had to read for Vogel's English class.

This is the start. You feel like the runner in the blocks with the starter saying, "Take your mark." You think Annette likes you like you like her, and your powers of observation increase. In the hallway, before her first-hour class, as she heads to History, her book bag brushes your back as you pretend to scrutinize your locker in search of the Biology text you know is at home. That briefest of touches—you wonder if by accident the first time but then realize with excitement the deliberateness when it recurs—drives your pulse to racing while your face flushes and you know today will be cosmic. You get your pathetic buzz on. Sure, you won't talk to each other, but her eyes will catch yours across the lunch room, and you pray you don't have mustard or mayo from your ham and cheese sandwich either on your face or on your shirt when she smiles at you. You sneak peeks, glance furtively, hoping to meet her eyes with yours with no food on your face. You realize that a packed lunch has a potential level of sabotage in a budding relationship, while your mother just thinks you are going through another ridiculous stage when you beg for packets of mayo and mustard to be packed in your lunch bag instead of slathered on the bread.

Over the course of the semester your relationship begins to bloom. Slowly. The backpack brush becomes a hand, and then one day she touches your arm as you reach into your locker. You know it is her because you have watched her peripherally as she leaves her locker, but you didn't think she would touch you. Actually, really stop, extend her arm, place her fingers on your muscle, and gently squeeze. Now you wish you had spent more time on weights through the fall. Even flexing would have helped that puny tricep, but too late. You have

to go with what she gives you, and a squeezed muscle is like a full-on hug when you're sixteen. Again you think about the rest of your life, the children you will have together, the life you will share. The touch seals it.

And so, when she calls you one December night, long distance, and invites you to see the Christmas lights with her, you don't hesitate. So what if you were going to the Maple Leafs' game with some friends? She called, on the other end of the phone with a voice that turns your brain to mush and makes your knees weak. You now understand Odysseus and the Sirens Vogel has been teaching in your English class for far too long. You would have come to her even if she had invited you to watch her cactus grow flowers. She has invited you to a destination—her.

The week drags; you know how that is—when you really want something and time crawls. Crawl would be an over-statement. This is like when you're in church, and the service is in Dutch, and you sing extra songs, include a baptism, and have a moment for missions where the missionary doesn't know the definition of moment. That kind of crawl, but Friday night finally arrives, and as you are in a crouch in front of your open locker attempting to excavate educational materials from the heap that has slowly grown to a small mountain, she leans over and whispers, "I'll see you tonight" with her lips beside your ears and her hands on your shoulders. You don't move; you just sort of melt and whimper like your puppy when just the right spot is scratched, and if she had said much more, your foot just might have started patting the floor like his does. Your ear only remains attached to your head because it doesn't have a choice or it would have abandoned your head for her lips. That happens when the warm breath of girls named Annette infiltrates your ear and permeates your brain, turning everything to mush. Her fragrance lingers after she leaves. You drive home in a haze, ignoring the weather warning that interrupts the radio station, and annoyed, you finally reach into the glove compartment and push Supertramp into the 8 track, listening to Roger Henderson tell you to take the long way home tonight, and you hope. . . .

You are barely in the door when your mom starts in about the weather. Your knowledge of being 16 and your parents' align not at all, and when she says, "I'm not sure you should go out with a

blizzard coming,” you explain that you just drove home on dry roads with no snow. Next you challenge the weatherman’s reliability, citing past warnings where Ernie-eye-in-the-sky missed by 3 days and 200 miles. Finally, she says, “we don’t think it is smart to take the car out.” Fat chance. Annette or a blizzard?

An hour later you call “bye” as you pull the backdoor closed behind you, paying no attention to the wind shift. The wind breathes through the white pines on the north side of the house, but the sound is as common as rain on a long weekend, so you miss that too. A ’71 Plymouth Fury with a full bench seat complete with center armrest and a positrack rearend is not intimidated by a little wind. You know nothing can stop you.

Annette lives about an hour and 10 away by back roads. The area is rural with very little traffic after 6 at night, and you know you can speed without fear, so you push it. There are only so many hours in a night, and the clock has already started. Annette has invited you to see the lights in a neighbouring town—an activity that 6 months ago would have been right up there with watching condensation form on a classroom window but now has you looking through the black windshield into a night of dreams. Lost in your thoughts, you imagine how the night will go. You wonder whether she will sit beside you in the car and whether she will hold your hand. You think about the things you should talk about and carefully prepare a list of interesting topics. Finally, your mind brings up the most plaguing and exciting idea—you wonder whether she will kiss you, and the whole litany of the internal kissing dialog recycles in your brain like it has so many times before. If she does, what will you do because you don’t know how to kiss, have never kissed, and are not sure how it should or will go. And in the same thought, you wonder if she will expect you to kiss her instead of her kissing you. And then you wonder if you should just turn around and go back home and blame the weather. But 16 doesn’t have much room for apprehension, and so you continue to split the night with the blackness closing behind you.

The excitement of arriving at her house has your palms sweating as they grip the steering wheel. You turn the signal light on far too early, but you want her father to know you’re conscientious in case he is watching. When you park the

car, you forget to undo your seatbelt as you analyze the imaginary figures in the dark windows analyzing you, and the seatbelt jerks you back to reality with slight whiplash as it restrains you. You make sure you have the keys in your pocket so you don’t lock them in; then you approach the house where Annette is waiting on the porch. Her auburn hair glows, backlit by the porch lights, and you attempt to relax enough to appear remotely normal. While Annette can tie you up in knots by sliding her index finger along the back of your arm, you are well aware of her parents’ ability to untie those knots in a single word before anything starts, so you search inside yourself for all of the best manners you have been taught.

Annette smiles and whispers, “Relax,” and even though you know that the absurdity of the comment is much like the line “you’re okay” when the car door slams on your fingers, that whispering—her giving you encouragement with that breath in your ear—makes you know you can do this.

After you assure her parents that you are responsible, not some freak looking to run off with their daughter, and her father has uttered his low-throated growl reserved specifically for 16-year-old boys—and only those boys can hear—you’ve passed the test. You know how this evening will go, and the sweat begins to recede. Life is good.

About 250 feet down the road, Annette states, “Brrrr, I’m cold,” and as you reach for the heater controls, she flips up the arm rest and slides right beside you. Right. Beside. You. Leg to leg. Hip to hip. Arm to arm. Shoulder to shoulder. Your hand retreats from the heater controls, and you notice the car is warming up quickly without it.

In driver’s ed, you learned hand positioning at 10 and 2 on the steering wheel, but you have this under control. You want to free your arm in case she might want to hold your hand or something, and so you take it off the steering wheel, but now you don’t know where to put it. The whole arm is sort of frozen in space, hanging there for about 10 seconds wondering what you have done to it, kind of like the cat wanting to go outside only to find out that it wants back in again. As it reaches for the security of the steering wheel, Annette intercepts it with, “I’ll take that,” as she tucks her shoulder behind yours, slides her arm under and inside of yours, and knits your fingers with hers. Thankfully, your palms are

no longer sweating although the temperature in the car is steaming the windows now.

You see the park by the glow of its lights reflecting into the night sky long before you arrive, but in time you get there, and Annette comments on how pretty the lights look bouncing off the falling flakes. Pulling into the crowded lot, you agree and get out to open her door. Annette slides across the bench and grabs your arm as she pulls herself up out of the car. And her grasp lingers, and your heart attempts to catapult out of your body.

Annette comes here every year, so she knows the place. You see the kid in her come out as she pulls you along, explaining the different scenes depicted on the front lawns of the neighbourhood. Some are thematic, like moving from page to page on a sketch book, and others are stand-alone oddities. She explains that some people don't want to play nice and refuse to be part of the concept. And then all too soon it is over. The lap around the block has been completed, and you find yourself back at the parking lot. Looking around, you notice most of the other cars have left, but the amount of time Annette has taken to explain and detail the scenes was lost on you—Annette is time. As you unlock her door and open it, before she gets in she puts two arms around your neck and hugs you. Flat out puts you in one of those fullon holds that are usually reserved for a pair of brothers fighting for things like the remote, the right to sit by the window, or the best baseball glove. Unfortunately your arm did not plan for this, so it continues its assignment of holding the door while the more adept of the two slowly comes to the realization that something extraordinary is occurring and wraps around her. The hug does not last long, but with no expectations on the horizon, you feel this moment is its own eternity. You don't know how long a hug is supposed to actually last, but you really like it, and the hug isn't complaining either. A definite byproduct is the amount of heat generated by two individuals in close proximity to each other that drives out the chill and bite of a tired and bitter wind that is now driving the previously unnoticed snow.

Finally she releases you, settles back into the car while you execute a happy dance behind the back bumper. Then you quickly get in, slam the door, and she says, "Brrr" and commandeers more of the driver's seat. You remember making cracks about guys whose girlfriends sat this close—"no heat in

that car?"—and now you think to yourself, "who needs heat?" until the windows begin to fog while the vinyl seats feel like concrete.

You wait a little as the windshield clears, but the awkwardness is over. You may not get another hug tonight, but she hugged you, even if you had nothing to do with it, and shortly after that thought, as you pull on the lights, you notice the snow has arrived in earnest. It is no longer coming down like the fluffy snow-globe scenes that occur when you shake that gauche souvenir that sits on the buffet; this snow surfs the wind and pelts the glass like a sandstorm, while snow snakes begin to writhe across the pavement under the stagelights of the car. Annette has already taken possession of your hand, and unwilling to trade that for the loneliness of the steering wheel, you increase your grip on the wheel with your left hand while your right nestles in the comfort of her fingers. The left one doesn't say anything.

The ice pellets pummel the windshield and obscure the road. As a matter of fact, you can barely see the hood ornament any longer as the snow envelops the two of you in this microcosm—and your mother's words echo in your head. Your eyes strain into the darkness, the green-lit glow of the dash lights reflecting on your face and up into the windshield, and you see both of your faces looking back at you. You notice how young the two of you look and, of course, how beautiful Annette looks melted into you. You also notice, when the fantasy of the moment wanes, how tense your mouth is, and that line only changes when you pull into her driveway.

The driveway came up so quickly that you didn't have time to turn on your blinker, and you can hear the growl from the face in the window even though Annette can't. Once the car is parked, Annette is sweet—she invites you in, but you know you'd better get going. So you walk her to the porch—you know there will be no hugs, let alone a kiss—not with a shadow in the window—and you sprint back to the car and plow your way toward home. You notice the way a few cars have trenched a track into the snow and how the accumulated snow channels your tires. The raised beds of snow scrub the floorpan of the Plymouth and suck its speed, and your hands are at 10 and 2. The radio is not on, and the heater is blowing against the windshield to fight back the frost that creeps

in from the edges. You briefly reflect on snowplows and their timing and their effectiveness and the value of clear roads and parents and their wisdom and being sixteen, but this is brief. At sixteen, being reasonable, rational, and responsible never lasts, so you do what you do best, reach down and pull out an 8-track, and push it into the player. You opt for Rush; the music rattles the windows as you turn up the sound, and you wonder if Getty Lee would have done this.

After 20 minutes of driving, with the car floundering in the drifts that sporadically arise, you punch the high beam switch with your left foot in an effort to see more. You see more all right. The snow that you had heard pelting the windshield has encircled the car, and what you see mostly is nothing but snow. What the high beams so clearly illuminate for you is the fact that you are in a blizzard. Your foot punches the switch once again while your mind revisits your mother's words. As much as you would like to prove this is no big deal, the little common sense you possess forces you to acknowledge that you need to turn the car around and go back to Annette's.

After tacking back and forth across the highway—you know that no other fool is going to be out so you don't worry about oncoming traffic—you search for tracks in the opposite direction, then realize the only tracks are the ones you made, and they are fast disappearing. Somewhere in all of this, the 8 track was pulled. Even if your conscious brain isn't bright enough to focus, the unconscious has subtly taken over and removed the distractions. Your hands grip the wheel at 10 and 2; your teeth hurt from clenching, while your pupils attempt to sneak out of your eyes and fasten themselves on the windshield.

The return trip is about 2 hours, and by the time you glimpse her driveway, you are too late, and you slide on by. At this point, you don't care about blinkers; her house is like base in a game of tag, and you are happy to be in close proximity to safe. You put the car in reverse and find what looks like the tracks you left several hours before and pull in. The porch light goes on, and your fingers attempt to unfasten themselves from the wheel. Your back is in knots as you exit the car—all of you feels like the bad end of a meeting with a baseball bat.

Annette waits at the door along with her dad, but the meeting is not like the highly anticipated

one earlier in the evening. The fact that she is waiting at the door and she looks happy to see you is lost on you. At this point you are a scared kid who just escaped a variety of potentially disastrous situations, and you are happy to be in a house, any house—even a house with a father who has a low growl in his throat. All he says is, "More sense than I thought you had," and Annette shows you the guest room.

The next morning the blizzard has blown itself out, and you hear the plows as her mom makes breakfast. The sun is shining, and the snow is a brilliant blue-white. Annette's dad has already cleared the driveway, and you wish you had gotten up to help—proving you are not as worthless as the growl in his throat seems to indicate—but you missed it. You whisper something along that line to Annette—she tells you not to worry about it. He likes doing that, but you know. First bad move of the day.

After you finish breakfast and help clear the table and put away the dishes, you need to get on the road. Because of how late you got back to Annette's house last night, you considerably chose not to call your parents, knowing how your mother worries when the phone rings late at night. That was a worse move but the most logical for someone who's sixteen. You get into the Plymouth, wait for it to warm up, and point its nose to the road. Supertramp goes back into the 8 track, and once you are far enough down the road for her father not to hear, you turn up the sound.

All in all, a pretty good night you think to yourself. Annette sat beside you in the car; she held your hand; she even hugged you; you didn't wreck the car; you didn't even get it stuck. It is only when you pull into your own driveway, your mother silhouetted against the garage, that you think something might be amiss. Over the years, you have learned to read her nonverbal communication, and you recognize her foreboding stance. You think there is a problem but do not realize it is you. "Hi mom," you call as you get out of the car with a smile. "Some storm eh?"

She is as oblivious to your romantic life as you are to her concerns until right now. You notice how tired she looks, but it is only when she spits out, "March." And you say, "March what?" And she says, "When you go out again." Then you realize the severity of the storm.