

July 8, 2012
Procopios of Caesarea

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When I turned on my Kindle one day last week, it immediately downloaded a book I had pre-ordered, Barry Farber's *Cocktails With Molotov: An Odyssey of Unlikely Detours*. This delightful collection of very short stories---vignettes, really---that come jumping from a skilled pen, are the recollections of an aging journalist who seems to have traveled nearly everywhere and to have met nearly everybody. I have not finished the book yet, nor am I eager to. Each story is an experience to savor.

The author's wry sense of irony is established early in the series by his account of an incident when he was five years old and growing up in North Carolina. Farber's mother, wanting to shop without the distraction of an inquisitive youngster, simply plopped him in the toy section of a department store, giving instructions that he could explore everything within reach but must not shift either foot.

Already, I'm afraid, the storyteller may forfeit the trust of readers unfamiliar with the customs and expectations of that ancient time. What responsible mother, after all, would leave her child unattended like that, while she went off shopping?

Farber, born in 1930, was five years old in 1935, three years before I was born, but my memories of that general era are crystal clear, and his narrative rings completely authentic. Those were very different times.

When I was five years old, in 1943, my mother would regularly hand me a short grocery list, some wartime ration coupons, and a little bit of money---for little bits were all we had, my father being away in the Pacific and the monthly government check always small and invariably late---and send me several blocks away, across a busy street, to a grocery store to do the family's shopping. (Grocery shopping had to be done every few days, since we had no refrigerator.) I would come home carrying a bag of whatever was on the list. On one occasion I distressed my mother by losing a vital coupon; our family could buy no meat that week.

Yes, I recall those days, when five year olds, who could walk safely on civilized streets, could also comprehend the burden of civilized commands. Mothers said, "come" and we came, "go" and we went, "don't even think about moving" and we didn't.

I tried something like that once with two granddaughters in an airport, a few years ago, when I needed to leave them just outside the door of the men's room. Their grandfather being broad-minded, the girls received instructions that they could shift their left feet but not their right feet, and that they must be able touch one another at all times. Three minutes later, when I came back from the men's room, one of the girls had strayed off down the corridor. Clearly, things had changed since 1943.

Anyway, to return to Farber back in 1935- --while he was standing in the same place

in the toy department, he eventually lost interest in the reachable toys. Glancing up, however, he caught sight of a phenomenon of singular interest. There were two drinking fountains on a nearby wall. One was marked "White," and the other was marked "Colored."

This made perfect sense to the lad. He knew that normal water was white, whereas water could also take on certain colors when interesting things were added to it. Deciding on a sociological survey, he closely watched which fountain the drinkers chose. To his great amazement and confusion, almost everyone picked the white water, not bothering with the (more obviously interesting) colored water.

As the boy surveyed the sundry parched individuals coming, one by one, to slake their thirst, he was unable to account for a fundamental failure of imagination. These dull-spirited people, lacking the most elementary sense of exploration and adventure, deliberately preferred the boring, tedious, mind-numbing, and utterly uninspiring white water to a beverage with more promise and better character.

The five-year-old, limited in his options, nonetheless attempted to interpret the vast, inscrutable enigma displayed before his very eyes. Reluctant to think himself surrounded by people of low mental aptitude---not to say a gang of utter idiots---young Farber was hard pressed to account for their strange drinking preference. At last, and reluctantly, he inferred that the colored fountain must be broken.

Farber concludes, in the book, "It took a few years to realize the One who made the water had a different concept from the one who made the signs!"

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