

# The Last Word

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I often wonder what ever happened to Kenneth Bookout and Joe Springer. Kenneth and Joe were fellow freshmen with me at Mercer University twenty-six years ago.

It's strange that I should think of them now, since I knew them so

slightly during that year at college. Kenneth transferred to another school at the end of his freshman year, and Joe disappeared a year later. I've never heard of either of them since; yet, just this morning as I was taking a shower, they popped into my mind.

Strange, but they both had a powerful influence on my life.

Kenneth lived on the other end of old Sherwood Hall, the freshmen dormitory located on the beautiful campus operated by the Georgia Baptist Convention in Macon. He was the only freshman—for that matter, the only guy on campus—who wore a pin stripe suit. Extremely studious, quiet, and deeply spiritual, the credits under his annual picture listed: Life Service Band, Choir, and Religious Education Association. That was a far cry from my list of important activities: R.O.T.C., ATO Greek letter social fraternity, varsity basketball and track, and Student Government Association. These marked me as a BMOC—Big Man On Campus—while Kenneth and Joe were like the faded flowers on the wallpaper in the dean's office.

I never talked to Kenneth—not a single time. He would remember me only as the loud-mouth from the other wing who was always leading the hall-runners in practical jokes. A favorite was to stick a firecracker in the keyhole of his door. Another was to set fire to a piece of paper, stick it under his door and shout "Fire! Fire!" When he opened the door, book in hand and peering over his glasses, we'd douse him with a bucket of water before running.

Shy and pre-occupied, he preferred staying in his room at night, reading his Bible, rather than joining us in a panty raid on the girls' dorm.

Rumor said he once walked head-on into a huge pecan tree in front of the library because he had his head down in a book. Picking himself up from the ground, he supposedly smiled, said, "Excuse me and God bless you," and continued on to class.

Joe Springer lived two doors down the hall from me. Like Kenneth, he was a Baptist ministerial student. One



arm was slightly deformed and he always looked like he had put his coat on without taking out the coat hanger. While my weekends were spent on fraternity parties, Joe spent his weekends preaching at a small country church.

Unless I was involved in a short-sheet escapade, or was smearing vaseline on their doorknobs, I stayed as far away from both boys as I could. They disturbed me. Yet, even though I have not seen or heard of either in more than two and a half decades, I am still affected by their influence.

I must have had thousands of conversations my freshman year, but I remember only one. It was a short conversation with Joe Springer one winter afternoon. I had come in from basketball practice and spotted him through the open door of his room as I walked down the hall of the dorm. He was propped up in bed reading his Bible. For some reason I stopped and talked, for deep inside I respected him.

"Jamie," he said seriously, "God needs some real men in the ministry. Why don't you give him your life?"

I don't remember my answer. I imagine I laughed it off. But I never could shake the question. It burned deep in my heart. It was like the time we tied Kenneth's shoelaces together while he was reading a book in the dining hall. When he stood up he lost his balance and crashed to the floor. His only reply, given with a shy smile, was, "Hey, that's a great trick, fellows."

God, how that seered my heart!

Like I said, I often wonder what ever became of them. This is certain, however, they were walking to the beat of a different drummer. They must be far, far down the road by now. I hope so, for their small witness went a long way in pointing me toward Christ.

The romance of the military ball has faded. Newsclippings of my campus activities are yellowed. Even my fraternity pin, that treasured Maltese cross with the diamond in the middle, is lost. Yet, haunting me today, even as I take a shower, are the faces of the two boys who dared to be different. Although they never knew it, they helped change my life.

I am grateful.

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