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Sunrise by the Pond

BY CARL GLICKMAN '68

An interfaith wedding by Johnson Pond in 1968, performed by a Colby religion professor who asserted that Jesus was not Christ, launched a 43-year (and counting) marriage and a life of respecting differences.

Have you ever been married at sunrise, under weeping willows, by Johnson Pond, with two flutists playing Handel's *Water Music*, by a religion professor who did not believe in Jesus as the Christ? Well, we have.

It was April 19, 1968, at Colby. I was the 21-year-old groom and Sara Orton the 19-year-old bride. Our professor, Gustave Todrank, agreed to marry us when none of our parents thought it was a good idea. My parents—bless their souls—fiercely resisted. Sara and I have remained happily together for 43 years and still counting. It still amazes us to look at a photo of students standing as witnesses in the chill of that early morning.

Being a college student in the Northeast in 1968 was to live in a time of transition. We read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Scott and Helen Nearing's *Living the Good Life*, and William Whyte's *The Organization Man*. We listened to the Young Rascals and Steppenwolf ("Born to be Wild"). The country was embroiled in civil rights marches and protests against the Vietnam War that grew in intensity in the following years.

And there were other transitions taking place in the classroom.

Sara and I had taken the introductory religion course, a lecture class for more than 100 students in Lovejoy 100, taught by Professor Todrank. Tall, lanky, and conservatively dressed, Todrank easily could have been mistaken for Ichabod Crane. Because of his formal demeanor and bald head, we thought he was old, but he probably was only in his forties.

On the podium, his somber manner was replaced by a pacing personality of charisma, thoughtfulness, and humor. He taught his students, mostly Protestants interspersed with Catholics and Jews and maybe a few Muslims, that Jesus was not Christ. He told us that Jesus lived and died as a Jew and never made the claim of being the only son of God or the only Christ. It was Jesus's followers, Todrank explained, that gave him the singular identity. It was pretty serious stuff to be teaching captive undergraduates. But Todrank always was respectful of his students and never pushed us to believe what he believed. We liked him.

Sara and I had decided to be married quickly. We knew my observant Jewish parents would put up a fight, and Sara's sufficiently Presbyterian parents would be less than enthused to have their teenage daughter carted off to who knows where by an unknown college



The wedding party, from left, Linn Fenno Stone '70, Sara Orton Glickman '71, Carl Glickman '68, Bob Bonner '68, and Professor Gustave Todrank, who officiated.

guy with no job prospects and no clue as to what they, a newly married couple, would do. Memories are sketchy, but what I remember is that we made an appointment with Professor Todrank.

He listened calmly to us, two students asking him to marry them in a few days at sunrise by the pond. He asked how we would write our ceremony, and we answered that we would draw from Eastern and Western religions and include some spiritual discourse as well. He must have asked about our parents, but it was not a significant part of the discussion. Finally he smiled and told us that we would make a good couple, or something like that, and agreed to officiate. He did not know us particularly well, and considerations that might cause a faculty member to hesitate—such as parents complaining to the administration—were of no concern to him.

In 2010 I sit on our deck looking off into the Georgia pines that surround our farmhouse. Beside me is a worn paperback out of print for decades. The book, published in 1969, was written by Gustave Todrank. He is gone now, but I think he would be pleased to see me

reading his book *The Secular Search for a New Christ*, based on his lectures to the same religion class we took as undergraduates.

His thesis was that Jesus was an extraordinary person and a christ amongst many. According to Todrank, the meaning of the word christ in pre-Biblical times was “agent of salvation” and referred to a function carried out by many persons. Later the definition was changed by the disciples of Jesus to refer only to a singular person. Todrank argued that Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Elijah, Confucius, Muhammad, Mary, Gandhi, Lincoln, and King were all christs according to the original definition. If Todrank were alive today (he died in 1982 at age 58), he might include Mother Teresa, Sojourner Truth, the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Paul Farmer, and others, some without fame, who struggled for the salvation of others. He emphasized that each of us has the ability to be a christ, and that secular institutions could fulfill the christ mission as well as religious institutions. Todrank raised profound questions and asked us to keep our minds open to new worlds of people and thought.

This may be hard for young people to understand, but in 1968, most of us identified ourselves by our ethnicity and religion. I grew up in an exclusive Jewish community and had no non-Jewish friends until Colby. I had been taught, as a Jewish child of the generation of the Holocaust, to be wary of those who were not Jewish. Todrank was the first Christian minister that I had known, and he was one of the most caring adults I had ever experienced. When I met Sara she was non-Jewish, but not one to be wary of, rather someone to love. What I understand now is that, when Todrank readily agreed

to sanctify our marriage, he was responding to his deep beliefs about the need to cross worlds to create a better world.

The Sara and Carl world of today would be incomprehensible to our ancestors. Our eldest daughter Jennifer is married to a mighty fine German fellow named Volker and they raise their children in Bonn. Two generations before, Jennifer’s ancestors were persecuted horrifically by Volker’s ancestors; now their children are a delightful mixture of seemingly impenetrable worlds. Our younger daughter, Rachel, is married to a guy named Henry, who is of Italy, drums, and ecological sensibilities. They live on the side of a mountain with their two spirited daughters, celebrating the most holy of holidays to them, the winter solstice.

And we, transplanted Northeasterners, continue to live on the outskirts of Athens, Ga. Our neighbors include African-American descendants of slaves, more newly arrived white and black professionals, and a few white native Georgians who still hang the Dixie flag. One couple down the road consists of a New York Jewish male clinical psychologist married to an Alabama Southern Baptist female wool weaver. Our road is tinged with history, eccentricity, poverty, wealth, sheep, mules, soybean fields, and the delivery of the Sunday *New York Times*. I remember a friend visiting for the first time, looking around incredulously and asking, “What it is like to live in the South?” My answer, “It’s home.”

I’m not sure my friend understood, but Professor Todrank certainly would have. At that spring sunrise by the pond, with his steadfast belief in us, he gave us the confidence to create our new world.

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Snapshots from the wedding album, include, from left, the wedding party at sunrise, the bride and groom, and the scene of the ceremony with a still-sleeping campus in the background.

