

*III John 1:2 Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest
prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.*

Greetings and God's richest blessings to all of you during this Christmas season.

Constance and I, along with our staff, wish you the merriest and happiest.

This year's essay is, "Ode to Sara Long." You are welcome to share it with friends and family. If you know someone who does not have internet access, they may write, call, or come by the office to pick up a hard copy.

In this great time of thanksgiving, we count each of you as blessings in our prayers.

I look forward to seeing you soon.

Warm Regards,

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Ode to Sara Long

This is not my first lion hunt. I've stopped man-eaters on four continents. Everything is resting on my shoulders. Today, I track two big cats. The Maasai call them, "The Ghost and The Darkness." 135 workers for the Uganda-Mombasa Railway have fallen to their claws. Last night, our construction foreman was dragged from his tent. This hunt is personal.

My eyes strain, anticipating a terrible rush, tawny death springing from the tall grass. The whiff of fear and fire assaults my nose, filling my senses with a primitive and exhilarating dread. The giant, plumed warriors have set the grass ablaze in a desperate attempt to drive the lions into my ambush.

Now here is the breathless moment of the charge; the "pop!" of the Infield Rifle; the moment of truth. Will I end the slaughter or become a victim? "Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!"

"Bob Darnell!" "Pop! Pop!" "Look up here, young man!" I turned to the voice of my Freshman English teacher, Mrs. Long, drawing me back from 1898, drawing me back from the veldt of Tsavo, Africa and my daydream.

"Pop! Pop!" her pointer slamming again on the battered oak desk at the front of the class.

With a shiver and flush of embarrassment, I glance back once more to the imagined flaming grassland *Were those amber eyes still gazing at the back of my head?* Then, with a deflated sigh, I returned to the 1964 English classroom. There at the

blackboard Mrs. Long had taught many a young redneck the value of reading and the richness of literature.

My ninth-grade eyes measured her. She was ancient, probably in her late fifties. Ignoring the bouffant fashions of 1964, Mrs. Long wore her silver-and-black hair brushed straight back from her face, hanging naturally just below the ears. Her tailored, skirted suits and colorful ties gave her the graceful swagger of Katherine Hepburn in “A Long Day’s Journey into Night.” Unlike most of the women I knew at that time, Mrs. Long seemed perfectly comfortable inside her skin. She strode around her classroom with a casual self-possession. For our hours with her, Sara Liston Long owned us, and we reluctant scholars learned not to mind.

There was drama in Sara’s soul. When she read a piece of poetry,

“...and doubly dying shall go down

to the vile dust from whence he sprung,

Unwept, unhonored, and unsung!”

there was a clear flash of exquisite pleasure in her eye. She explained the piece as much with her voice inflection as with her subsequent erudite instruction. We *felt* what the words meant by the way she pronounced them.

“Ethereal minstrel! Pilgrim of the sky!” she read and pointed aloft with her ever-present stick. Her expressive reading let us know that Wordsworth was using his poem to describe the sound and flight of a lark. Since the yellowhammer was the state bird of Alabama, we were all familiar with its song and its manner of transportation.

Mrs. Long used what we knew to her advantage, always bringing the esoteric to the familiar and so weaving the unfamiliar realm of literature with the familiar

countryside and backwaters of the Alabama River town we called home. Sara's encyclopedic knowledge, erect posture, and clear conviction persuaded me that she knew some mysteries. That intrigued me. In my daydreams I solved treasure maps, but in the classroom I was generally perplexed and distracted. Football and its physical challenge had become a refuge for my teenaged angst.

There was a commonly held belief among those of us on the team that Mrs. Long had our Coach in her pocket. So, there were none of the usual shenanigans that happened in shop or algebra class. For we were convinced that Sara Long could bring down the wrath of the athletic director with a beautifully scribed note carried by the offender to the Coach's office.

"Students," she would announce, eyeing us, "reading is the centerpiece of all education." She repeated it until we believed. "The essence of every subject or endeavor can be gained by reading." So we read.

Mrs. Long had achieved a college education at a time when most women did not. She was hired for her scholarship and not for a teaching certificate. She was a true treasure of education. She taught us as much for her love of teaching as for our necessity to learn.

Sara insisted we write a page of our impressions of some assigned piece of classical literature, and every week we would stand up with squeaky fourteen-year-old voices and recite poetry from memory. William Wordsworth was one of her favorites:

To A Skylark

Ethereal minstrel! Pilgrim of the sky!

Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?

Or, while the wings aspire, are heart and eye
Both with thy nest upon the dewy ground?
Thy nest which thou canst drop into at will,
Those quivering wings composed, that music still!

Sara Long's expectation presented a staggering obstacle to a bumbler like me. To say I had struggled through the first nine years of my education would be the highest form of euphemism. I sat painfully distracted, bored and tormented in public school; a scintillating specimen of Attention Deficit Disorder, decades before the diagnosis was discovered. I was labeled "lazy" and I seethed in an underachiever's loneliness and frustration.

I failed the fifth grade and found my first glimmer of academic hope in the summer school library. There, Edgar Rice Burrows thrilled me with his exotic tales of adventure. I can remember the moment it struck me that inside the pages of each book lay the thoughts of an adult who wanted to share deep truths with me.

My earliest memories are of sitting in my mother's lap, turning the pages of large picture books while she read from Robert Louis Stevenson's, *Escape at Bedtime*, "And high overhead and all moving about, There were thousands of millions of stars." My mother's beautiful, steady voice took me to Treasure Island and down the Mississippi with Tom and Huck.

As the number of my brothers grew, I moved to the edges of the bed where she read to her five sons, but the memory of the symphony of her lovely voice still moves me forward.

“That’s enough for tonight boys,” Mother would say, “we’ll begin here tomorrow.” We always went to bed anticipating the resumption of some great adventure guided by my mother’s voice.

It was Tarzan of the Apes that taught me to love to read books for myself. It was Sara Long who transformed me from a distracted failure into one of her “Princes of Intellect” and taught me to love to learn. But it was a fight. And she was a formidable foe of ignorance or laziness.

Sara was undaunted by a giant dullard. She parried sullen resistance with wit and vivid explanation. “Class,” she said, “the mastery of the language, though eminently desirable, is a difficult matter, a rocky road, up hill all the way. However, those who persevere in it are a noble band, a company of heroes, and I am not only your teacher but your comrade in the struggle toward this shining goal. Excelsior!” she cried, wielding her pointer like a fencer’s sword.

A ripple of mirth and amazement coursed through the room as we looked at each other incredulously. We could not believe our ears! Mrs. Long was an eager proponent of 1960’s-style classroom management. She was a firm believer in the “all pervasive spirit of academic earnestness” and required every eye focused on her and every ear straining to grasp the pearls of wisdom falling from her lips. It made us all a little nervous for her to utter such encouragement and even to add, with witty flair, her own participation in our learning process. Though I longed to travel in the company of heroes at fourteen, I had only managed the company of football players.

“Dost thou despise the earth where cares abound?” she continued with a sidelong glance at us. “See here, how Wordsworth layers his thoughts on a few words and uses

the explosive flight of the bird to question its intent to soar and sing, to escape its responsibility.”

I don't want to know, I thought, but I was intrigued with the concept that a few words could communicate more than one kind of idea. When our next assignment came, “Write an essay about your family.” I borrowed some of Wordsworth’s devices to liven up my story about our family reunion in Clarksville, Tennessee. When the papers were returned, Mrs. Long handed back every one but mine.

“Bob, I’d like you to stay after class, please.”

My face was red and my heart was pounding so loudly I was sure the students around me could hear. *Did I forget to hand it in? I’m sure I handed it in! Am I failing?* I sighed aloud as certain doom crept up my spine. My buzz cut hair was wet with the sweat of humiliation. I thought I might cry right there in front of everyone.

Seconds ticked by slowly until the final bell rang and the other students clambered noisily out of the room. With dread that weighted my shoulders and sucked the air out of my lungs, I shambled to Mrs. Long’s desk.

“Ma’m?” I queried as only a polite southern boy can.

“Bob, your spelling is atrocious and your punctuation is cryptic at best.”

My heart began to sink and my face turned redder. I steeled myself for another revelation of my lack of scholarship. “The abbreviation for ‘etcetera’ is, ‘etc.’ not ‘ex.’”

Mrs. Long handed me my paper. I looked down dejectedly at the dozens of red marks and comments she had written precisely in the margins and between the lines.

“I see you are listening more and daydreaming less. In places, your recitation is actually quite charming. My question to you, young man, is how have you written the best essay that I have read in years?”

I was stunned.

She went on to say, “This piece is so clear and vivid. Why, I can almost see your grandmother with the wheelbarrow full of potato salad.”

Her words made me feel something familiar. Not relief, but something akin to the feeling I got from sacking the quarterback. Success.

Mrs. Long continued, “This is warm and funny and it reveals a real command of the visual elements of description.”

I wasn’t entirely sure what she meant, but for the first time, I was beginning to think that I could succeed at what she called, “A command of the language.”

“What has changed, young man?” she asked.

“Well, Ma’m,” I began, “you know how you make us memorize and recite every week.”

“Yes,” she said with a quizzical smile.

“”I wrote that essay as if you were going to read it aloud.”

“So-o-o-o,” she responded, “words are livelier than their definitions!”

“Yes, Ma’m,” I replied, my smile growing into one that would last the rest of my life. That smile is always present when I learn something.

“Young man, you must continue to write. You have a fine mind under that crew cut.” Then she leaned forward and gripped my arm firmly. “Today, I’m giving the best

paper I've read in years a C- but if you will go home and correct the spelling and punctuation, I'll proudly give you the A it deserves."

"Thank you Ma'm, thank you!" I exalted, roaring out of the classroom. I was going to bring home an A.

Sara Liston Long went on to inspire hundreds of other knuckleheads to learn to love learning and to pursue higher education. One year there were two Rhodes scholars from the same class. Not me, of course. I still struggle with spelling and punctuation. But I still write, just as she advised me. At some point in every piece, I think of how Sara Liston Long might read it aloud.

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I'm sure you have had people who have inspired you like Mrs. Long inspired me. This time of year we celebrate the birth of the most inspirational person of all time. As a Christmas greeting, I thought you might enjoy this selection from a collection of poetry published by Pentecost Press in 1981.

Madonna

--by Sara Liston Long

Old men and little children say
That Christ the Lord is born today,
And seraphs' silver trumpets swell
The tale that thronging angels tell.

The anguish of that Christmas eve
Only a woman could believe,
Who's walked the path, so hard, so slow,
That Mary walked so long ago,
To wear the thorny diadem
That Mary wore in Bethlehem.
(Has child or sage or angel told
How it was that night—so long, so cold?)

The joy that came that Christmas day
Only a woman's heart could say,
Whose tortured eyes, now open wide,
Caress the warm thing at her side,
While her trembling fingers, numb with joy,
Hold the tiny hands of her heavenly boy.