

"This Changed My Life" by R.N. Rowsell (ca. 1970)

Source: RNR Papers, Book P27, p.23
(Original title "Peace" has been scratched out)

What a privilege it is for me to tell you how my life was permanently enriched by two people. This enrichment affected my life unnoticeably and the full extent of the impress was not realized by me until November 11, 1968 when I was in my fifty-ninth year.

November 11, 1968 was a day of celebration for us, the whole eleven of us, for on that day father and mother celebrated their sixtieth wedding anniversary. We all rejoiced that for sixty years we had not been called upon to experience a break in the family.

On that day I, the eldest of the nine children, looked at distant views through the eye of memory which eye could see the widely separated scenes because of the Christian spirit, the sanctified emotions and the abundant love dissolved in the atmosphere by concerned parents. Some of these scenes are described in the following paragraphs. Other of these pictures are indescribable and will be understood only when eternal light shines upon them.

Here therefore I set down some bits of history and describe some incidents that may be of interest to you and maybe will enrich your life a little as they have enriched mine.

The marriage of my parents? I must say a word about that. I obtained the facts from my father's diary which faithfully he wrote for many years.

The groom was Arthur William Rowsell, born February 14th, 1880. The bride was Blanche Anstey born February 27, 1891. They were married at 5:00 p.m. on Wednesday, November 11, 1908. The wedding took place on Rowsell's Island, Leading Tickle West, Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland. The minister was Rev. Mr. Stapleton, Methodist.

The "Bride's Boys" (so called in that day) were Israel Rowsell, Willis Spencer and George Rowsell. The "Bride's Maids" were Anna Chippett, Minnie Rowsell and Lucy Rowsell.

The bride and groom and party left the little gray house, walked east in the garden and on through the gate. Then they walked north on the road along by their garden fence and passed by the family well. At the corner of the fence they turned west and wended their way up the slow incline to the tiny white church nestled among the Atlantic-toughened spruce.

My forebears chose to live on an island that they used as a base from which they fished for cod. Like a goodly number of islands in Newfoundland, Rowsell's Island got its name from the surname of its first inhabitants.

Nobody lives on Rowsell's Island today. The inhabitants moved off the island years before Joseph R. Smallwood brought Newfoundland into the Canadian Federation. Not even the old Methodist church was left on the Island. The Church was launched to Cull's Island by Israel Rowsell and today it is lovingly cared for by Kenneth Rowsell, Israel's son and his friends.

I, in a quiet moment, having imaginatively seen and heard my forebears designing and building their schooners, "The Eight Brothers" and the "Rowsell's Barque."

I have seen and heard the saw in the "sawpit" and by that I knew my fathers intend to build a schoner, a boat or a house out of solid 'stuff'.

I have seen and heard them in their work-shops making their own furniture for these men were cabinet makers of the highest order.

I have seen and heard the "women-folk" as house-keepers, needle-workers, cooks, hostesses and spreaders of fish on bough-covered flakes. These were angels of the noblest types come to earth to be wearers of aprons, saviours of men and mentors to these men's children. My mother was one of them.

I have seen and heard that huge iceberg some distance from the island's shore struggling to free itself from the island's foundations. That berg rolls, grinds its base against the rock, weeps in the sun, glistens in the sun, separates one part of itself from the other in an effort to set itself free. And the ground-swell tantalizes that iceberg mercilessly.

I have seen and heard the seas roll in on Levi's Beach on Rowsell's Island as a token of the ocean's call to anyone who has the sea in his blood. But there is no one on the island to be beckoned.

Peace is the title I have given to this essay. [Hebrew word is penned in here] This is the Hebrew word for peace. It is pronounced "sha-lom".

[Greek word is penned in here] This is the Greek word for peace and it is pronounced "eirēnē".

These words have become flesh and blood for us for on this day we have seen peace, not in a strange word of a strange language, but we saw it in father and mother, especially in mother who, in spite of much weakness bore the day heroically and unconsciously revealed a deep calm in the centre of her life and this deep calm we call peace.

Our parents passed through storms enough in these sixty years to make their lives become "void and without form" but instead of that the eternal God through their faith and by his mighty Spirit breathed upon the face of the billows, blew away the boisterousness and created a deep calm, peace.

That peace on this day was seen by us, their sons and daughters. Seven of the sons and daughters were present on this anniversary with their husbands or wives. Two sons and their families who reside at Toronto, Ont. and at St. John, N.B. could not be present for the occasion. But these were there too through the tokens of telegrams and flowers.

I saw at the close of the day's festivities that we all not only saw that peace, we possessed it.

Peace comes through prayer. Father and mother proved that for us. Those of us who are older in the family will recall the practice of prayer our parents demonstrated in the family circle.

The years have made a different though. There seems to have been something in the society of the past forty years that took people off their knees in family prayers.

While the practice of family prayer has lost its hold in many homes, we are convinced beyond all doubt that even today there are few if any families in Newfoundland or Canada that are remembered more often at the Throne of God in the private prayers of father and mother than we are.

Sweet and befitting it was on that glad 60th wedding anniversary to end the celebrations in hymn and prayer.

Being the eldest of the family I remember, I suppose, things of which most of the family have not much knowledge.

I remember when, in days of simpler living on Rowsell's Island when there was no demanding routine, father would leave his work-shop about four in the afternoon, go to his bedroom and pray.

I remember his prayers in the church or at the cottage meeting how they were uttered in passionate tones, filled with immense sincerity and genuine emotion.

We had three brothers in World War II of whom two were in the 166 Newfoundland Field Regiment and one in the Royal Air Force. If ever sons in the services were prayed for, these were they.

How well I know that in my work in the Christian ministry, my parents' prayers have guided me as Hannah's guided Samuel and as Susannah Wesley's guided John.

I remember that in the little kitchen at Rowsell's Island in Leading Tickles when my two younger brothers were asleep, I was given the privilege to remain with mother to help her as she hooked her mat.

I cut the narrow pieces from the larger cloth or tore off the narrow pieces of whatever colour mother needed to hook into the brin (sackcloth).

I remember one such night when "the wind was blowing hard" and I had torn and cut a lot of cloth, mother reminded me that father was somewhere on his way home from Labrador with "Skipper Henry" Anstey (mother's father) in his schooner The Picadello.

When the mat-frame was "lodged away", when the bits of rag were swept from the kitchen floor and before we went to bed, mother prayed. What a lot of meaning she put into these words - "Guard the sailors tossing on the deep blue sea."

The peace that I have referred to which lived in father and mother, a peace that came through prayer, wrought not only the miracle of peace in them but the miracle of guidance and protection for the members of the family, a guidance and protection I have noticed more than once.

It must have been rich soil where this prayer, this peace and this guidance were cultivated. It was.

Mother's commitment to Christ (when she was 'converted', she says) began when she was twelve years of age. Father's began when he was nineteen. They had interest when they were young, they were diligent in scripture reading, they had "lots of fellowship" with Christian friends and they persevered in their calling for years on end.

How many evenings in late fall and winter did we spend romping on the kitchen floor? The hooked mats were pushed aside. Dad challenged us to wrestle him and bring him to the floor. He knew so many things to do - the forward bend, the lazy-stick, put your toe in your mouth, put your foot behind your head. He taught us how to "leap the salmon", and we've been doing it ever since. There were so many things we did, romping.

When the agility movements were being performed and there was uproar in the kitchen, so often I heard mother say, "O Arthur, you are worse than the boys."

Then Dad said, "Come, boys. Put the mats back in their places and get ready for bed. I must make my chovies." I do not know how to spell his word but that is how it sounded to me.

"Chovies" were splits (kindlings) off which shavings were cut with each last end of the shaving not cut from the split at its farthest end. A split was a slip of wood measuring more or less than an inch in diameter and cloven from a dry billet.

In the Nineteen-Twenties we had a difficult time "to keep the wolf from the door". Sometimes we were hungry. Thinking of that, I shall never forget the delightful taste of buttered toast after we had spent what seemed like a terribly long while without butter, without sugar and without cream in our tea.

In those days mother had a vinegar plant and she used to make vinegar pies. I must confess that I didn't like them very much but they make a welcome dessert.

Father earned a pittance cutting railway ties. I helped him. Even though he did receive a pittance, he was completely honest and was certain that every tie he carried out of the woods had not less in every respect than the required measurements. Here I saw the big man who left big things for a bigger Newfoundland.

There are many other things I could write down in this essay. Some day I hope to write other pages for those of the family that still remain. I shall too, of course, correct the pages I have written here in a hurry. I think the title of my future book will be: Biography Plus.

I write this for anyone who may take the time to read it, but especially do I write it for Mom and Dad so that they may be able to see it with their mortal eyes. I write this so that when the house of father's and mother's tabernacles are dissolved and they enter into their Heavenly Tabernacle, they will have happy hearts and they will know that their sons and daughters are deeply grateful for the things their parents have said and done.