

---

# A Custodian's Description

**JOHN TUNGATE**

John Tungate arrived at Judson in 1968 and for the next ten years took care of the physical needs of the church building and of Judson House.

---

**T**here was nothing platonic about my relationship with Judson House. As the maintenance man and janitor I knew Judson House in the most physical of ways. I knew its sound, its smells, its problems, and its dirty secrets. I even knew what it looked like inside its walls and floors and ceilings. Judson was my home and work for many years. Its physical problems became my problems, day and night! It was the kind of familiarity that Al described in his oratorio "A Look at the Fifties," when he talked about how you come to know and love "the smell of your own gym floor."

Before I tell you anything about my experiences at Judson House, I have to make a few things perfectly clear. They are nicely summarized in one of Al Carmines's oratorios performed at Judson Church during the early 1970s. Like most of what Al wrote, they are clearly words to live by.

I know everything, (at least I think I do),  
The rest I make up, the rest I make up  
Some things I'm sure of, other things I'm not so sure  
The rest I make up, the rest I make up.

Taking this as the guiding light for recounting my memories and experiences at Judson House, I warn you that the responsibility for

any lapses in memory, exaggerations, incorrect information, or outright lies rests solely on the shoulders of the editors, who should have known better than to ask me what I remember about Judson House from so long ago.

Coming to work at Judson Church in 1968 was a perfectly natural decision for me since I had just finished two years of active duty as a medic in the U.S. Army. I made the decision to work at Judson in the same way the army made all their personnel decisions: Almost all the cooks had been either auto mechanics or carpenters in civilian life, and 95 percent of the auto mechanics had never used a screwdriver before. So, it seemed perfectly reasonable to me to work at a church since (1) I had given up on all forms of organized religion years ago to become a solitary Zen Buddhist; (2) I had no previous experience whatsoever as a janitor or maintenance man; and (3) I felt I was the perfect candidate for this job at Judson Church.

I had not yet heard back from my first choice of a new civilian career (as a letter-carrier for the U.S. Post Office), so I took the job as the church janitor at Judson and began my new duties under the careful tutelage of a conscientious objector doing alternative service named Reathel Bean. I trailed around Judson Church and Judson House in my combat boots and crewcut and newly bought blue denim uniform of overalls with the over-the-shoulder straps while learning from Reathel which of the fifty-odd keys I carried on a big ring went to what door.

Like many newcomers to Judson I was still naïve about certain aspects of life in New York's Greenwich Village and at Judson. I couldn't at first understand why I seemed to attract the attention of some of the male dancers that rehearsed in the church gym and the meeting room upstairs: What was so interesting to them about a young, muscular, crew-cut army veteran still wearing his combat boots, with a huge ring of keys, and all sorts of tools hanging off his leather belt? As I changed the side I wore my keys on, I found it seemed to attract different people. What could all this mean? I thought, "How friendly they are to an Army veteran; and even while the Vietnam War is still going on!"

Thank goodness Reathel was there to help me. Although Reathel was from a small town in the Midwest, he had been around Greenwich Village for a while and was quick to help explain the secret language of the heavy ring of keys. Reathel told me that many of these

male dancers were sons of chiropractors and they were very concerned about me hurting my back when I was carrying these heavy keys on one side. That cleared up any confusion I might have had about what it all meant. (Thanks, Reathel!)

I have not been in Judson House for over twenty years. I have driven by it once or twice, but I can still see it clearly in my mind's eye. For at least ten years afterward, I could have closed my eyes and told you where every light switch and outlet were (and I could have done the same for all of Judson Church, too). I knew every sound of every door, every gate and set of stairs. Even today, you could test me with recordings of the slamming of any of the doors and I could tell you instantly which one was the side door to the church, which one the security door or back door to the offices, which one was the double glass doors to the sanctuary or the steel door from the cage room to the gym. I could tell the sound of the Garden Room sliding door and its screen door in my sleep from my room in Judson House.

## THE GRAND TOUR

Let me try to describe to you what the physical building was like, take you on a tour of its rooms, and tell you what I can still see and hear when I close my eyes and remember Judson House.

Judson House is a three-story brick building at the corner of Thompson and Third Street in Greenwich Village. It is a narrow building, with its façade running from Third Street uptown along the west side of Thompson Street until it meets the corner of the Judson Church building. Its footprint is roughly rectangular but it has insets or wells along the backside of the building. This technique was used often in New York City tenement buildings to meet the New York City Building Code requirements for light and ventilation. By cutting out a portion of the rectangular footprint and making an open shaft way or well, inner rooms could still meet the city codes for natural light and ventilation even when another building was built right against it, as it was done with the rowhouses in New York and other cities.

Judson House has one such cutout in back that is big enough to be called a small courtyard. It is just a little lower than the basement floor of Judson House, with an outside area drain. I close my eyes

and imagine that I am standing there again: I can see two doors that open onto this courtyard, one from what was the old kitchen when Judson House was a student's residence, the other door opening onto the narrow back hall to a separate apartment, where Joan Muyskens, the church secretary, lived part of the time when I was at Judson.

The main front entrance to Judson House is on Thompson Street, roughly in the middle of the building. There are two low stone steps up to the front door, then a wood landing inside, then several more wood steps up to the first floor level. The wood landing and steps are covered with linoleum, and there are bright metal "nosing" strips on each stair trap.

There are three more doors in the front of the building, each one partly below street level, going into the building at the basement level.

### **Façade**

The façade on Thompson is set back from the sidewalk by two open wells that extend down to the subbasement below, thus allowing for windows and doors below the sidewalk, on the basement level. At the Third Street end is a gate in the steel railing that surrounds one well. There are steep steps down to a steel landing outside the door to the basement apartment. After another gate, a longer set of wooden steps goes down to the subbasement. Similar gates and steel landings give access to the front door to the kitchen, to the left of the main entry, and to the Judson Gallery at the north end.

At the north end, a fire escape stairs comes right down to the street level suspended over the other well. It is enclosed in a steel security mesh so it can be opened only from the inside and (theoretically) keep anyone from climbing up from the street. The fire escape runs up between the church building and Judson House to the second-floor hall window. The fire escape continues to the third-floor window of Judson House and then up a flight of steel steps to a door cut into the thick back wall of the church building. This door connects to the "fluff room" over the rose window and to the spiral staircases down to the dressing rooms on two levels and up to the secret walkways and spaces hidden above the sanctuary ceiling.

The exterior walls of Judson House are brick, painted red, with cut stone as sills and lintels for doors and windows. The windows are double hung, with old-fashioned weight boxes and chains. The counterweights inside are cast-iron and torpedo shaped with the numbers indicating their weight cast into them on the side and a loop at the top to attach the chain.

The roof is flat, and made of built-up bituminous layers laid down hot, the old-fashioned way.

### **The Judson House Parking Area**

If you look out the back windows of Judson House you see the Judson Garden courtyard below, and beyond it—up a few steps—is the Judson Garden itself and the parking area. You can also see the wood fence separating the garden from the parking area and beyond it the brick wall on Third Street with a sliding garage door built into it. The heavy garage door slides toward the Thompson Street side (to your left from here) toward the old storage rack against the wall that is not visible around the corner of the building. The bottom of the door rubs on the concrete and you have to stand with your back braced against the side jamb to push it open. The sound of the garage door opening is distinct and recognizable through the open windows of the second floor. Here there is an old wood rack with mostly scraps and junk. Here, too, Howard Moody sometimes parks his car, and I keep my Volkswagen bus and canoe.

This parking area behind Judson House is a good place to overhaul a Volkswagen bus engine. Here, you can jack up the back end of your bus as high as the jack will go, then build a platform of wood scraps under each rear wheel. You keep jacking and building the platform until you have room to slide a wheelbarrow under the engine from underneath between the rear wheels of the bus with its rear end now tilted up at almost a 30-degree angle.

By cutting a hole in the back sheetmetal floor over the engine, and building a 2x4 tripod, you can use a block and tackle and lower your engine down into the wheelbarrow. Then you can wheel it through the garden to the back door, and there discover that the engine is so light that you can pick it up and carry it into the janitor's work room in the basement and set it on the workbench. After overhauling it you can carry it back out and install it in reverse order.

### **Inside the Walls and Floors, Technically Speaking**

The inside walls (except where new sheetrock has been installed) are of plaster over wood lath. The “brown coat” plaster has fibers in it, probably horsehair. The wood lath is on furring strips on the outside walls. The furring strips are nailed into the masonry of the outside wall except that a “trick” was used in some places in Judson House on the inner course of the brick walls: The 3/8-inch wood lath was sometimes laid into half of a horizontal mortar joint instead of mortar—one course near the ceiling and one near the floor, and sometimes a third in the middle. This would allow the nailing of the furring strips directly into the wooden strip buried in the wall. (This wasn’t always such a good trick because when I took down the plaster, the wood lath had dried out and become loose inside the wall.) The interior separation walls are of rough cut 2×4s (the old full-sized ones) with some partitions of thinner 2×3s.

The floor joists are wood, often full-sized and rough-cut. Bridle irons have been used in some places where headers cut across a run of joists, and the joists fit into pockets, or “seats,” in the brick masonry walls. The top corners of these joists have been “firecut” to allow them to fall free of the wall in case of collapse during a fire. In this way the entire masonry wall will not fall down. The old wood flooring is wide tongue-and-groove strip flooring (probably pine) fastened to the joists with cut nails. It is partially blind-nailed, partially face-nailed.

### **The Sounds of the Front Hall**

I can still hear, as plain as day, all the noises as someone—let’s say Al Carmines—enters 237 Thompson Street. There is the muffled sound of a key being inserted on the outside of a two-inch thick wood door. It makes the door resonate in a certain way as the key enlarges the pins inside and pushes up against the spring-loaded brass pins above, then suddenly there is a rush of street sounds—the noise of cars and voices bouncing off the wall of the Catholic church on the other side of Thompson. There is the soft creak of the hydraulic door-closer arm at the top of the door. The hinges are on the side closest to the park and they, too, make a soft rubbing sound as Al’s shoe hits the metal edging on the first step inside the door.

He will reach the second step—his shoes rattling the metal nosing again—before the door slams hard against the electric door-release strike and shakes the whole wall and rattles the loose pane of glass on the second floor window right above the door, in my room. It is all over in a few seconds: Al's deep voice humming a few notes as he turns right and crosses to the heavy steel door to his apartment; the click of the brass knob retracting the latch on the mortise lock; and his voice, still humming, cut off in mid-sound by a soft clunk, as the self-closing hinges seal his door from the first-floor hallway. Through the closed door you can still hear him thump up the steps just inside his apartment, the sound of those steps unlike any other anywhere else in Judson House. Then it's quiet again, only a lingering smell of cigarette smoke in the hallway and the muffled sounds of the street outside.

### **First Floor South Memories**

If you turn left instead of right, there is another heavy steel fire door with self-closing “Bommer” type hinges that have adjustable steel tensioning pins. The lock is a brass mortise lock set, with a brass cylinder, a deadbolt, and brass knobset. The doorframe is also steel, and on the hinge side is the fire rating label for the door. You enter the hallway with windows on your right and continuing down the first floor hall, there are dormitory type rooms on the left. Past the windows on the right is the door to the bathroom. It is large with one toilet, one sink, and one white-painted steel shower stall. The single bulb of the ceiling light does not give enough light to see the scum and soap built up inside the stall. There is no door on the stall—only a built-in rod and a dirty plastic shower curtain. The base is precast concrete, and the steel is rusting where it meets the base.

This is the same space that I later renovated with the help of volunteers. Linda Simmons, an architect, helped us keep it simple and straightforward. We gutted the corner space (at Thompson and Third) into one large room, and instead of concealing all the pipes and electrical conduits, we simply painted them bright colors and let them be open and visible (in keeping with the times, we “let it all hang out”). It was in the old bathroom on this floor, years before this renovation, that I first learned how to cut sheetrock.

Although Arlene Carmen, the church office manager, used to say that “John Tungate can fix anything,” it was really not true. But I got that reputation and had to work very hard to keep my public image untarnished and to live up to Arlene’s expectations. Therefore, I was constantly having to learn new skills to cope with the things I got called on to fix. Sooner or later I had to fix everything from the old Gestetner offset printer and typewriters, to door locks, light fixtures, and any part of the church, building, or theater set that could possibly have a problem. Eventually I got pretty good at it, but thank goodness Arlene didn’t see some of my “rich learning experiences” that preceded my eventual competence, or I might have had to reapply for that letter carrier job after all.

### **CUTTING SHEETROCK THE EASY WAY**

On this particular day I had to patch the ceiling in the bathroom that was right at the inside corner of the building with one window facing the little “courtyard” that was formed by the first-floor hall on our side and the parking area and garden on the other.

A carpenter from Canada affectionately referred to as “John Canada” was visiting, and he quietly watched as I got ready to cut sheetrock the way I had always done it, that is, I’d put on a dust mask and goggles and coveralls, mark my cut on the sheetrock, and then one, two, three, I’d cut out the pieces I needed with an electric “skill saw.” After the dust had cleared enough to see again, I’d climb the ladder, and nail up the sheetrock pieces I had cut. If the piece was quite large, I would use a “T bar” to help hold the piece up. Then I would begin the slow task of cleaning up the room, top to bottom, to remove all the sheetrock dust. That electric saw sure threw a lot of dust all over the place.

Well, “John Canada” watched me do this once without saying anything and then politely suggested that there was an easier way than using a 120-volt, 7½ inch, 2,800 rpm standard #487 all-purpose hand circular saw (made by the Skill Corporation) that had enough power to coat a normal-sized 8.5×11-foot room with .024 inches of white plaster dust with only one cut in a taper-edged, 4×8-foot sheet of 5/8” U.S. Gypsum type “x” sheetrock. John Canada then showed me how the rest of the world cuts sheetrock (with a knife and

no dust), and I was truly amazed! I never told Arlene about this, not wanting to bother her with such minor technical details.

## **ON WITH THE TOUR**

Upstairs on the second floor is another apartment above Al's. This was Beverly Waite's apartment when I first came to Judson, and later this was the apartment for the "house parents" for the runaway project; finally Arlene Carmen moved into it.

On the third floor there is no apartment at this north end. The whole third floor is divided into dormitory-type single rooms with a central hallway running the full length and with a bathroom on each side of the floor.

From the first floor to the basement, the main stairs are narrower. At the bottom of the stairs is another hallway. Like upstairs, each side door from the hallway has a heavy steel-clad fire door with self-closing hinges separating the stair hall from the rest of the building. And like upstairs in the hall, there is a flush metal door built into the wall, hiding the electrical fuse panel. Inside are round plug fuses in two vertical rows. When electricity fails, this is where you must hunt to replace the blown fuse.

### **Changing a Blown Fuse**

Willy, the electrician, once showed me the easy way to check for a blown fuse at the panel in the first-floor hallway where there must be almost thirty fuses. Sometimes you can't tell if a plug fuse has gone bad simply by looking at it. At times the fusible line won't "blow" and darken the little window. Then you have to unscrew each fuse and test it and replace it when necessary.

Willy said doing it that way took too long. He would just lick the tips of his thumb and first finger and shove his hand behind the panel and touch each of the fuse holders in turn, working his way down each row until he would say "here it is." He would quickly unscrew the bad fuse and pop in a new one. Sure enough, that was it! Willy saw how impressed I was and explained to me how it worked. If the fuse was good, the electricity would flow through it and you wouldn't feel any current in your fingers, but if the fuse was

blown, it didn't have a path to travel and all the electricity would instead go through your fingers. But you had to wet your fingertips so you could feel it better.

"Feel right here," he said, reaching into the panel and touching two big terminals on the panel with his wetted fingertips, "this is 220." Touching two smaller ones, he said, "This is 110; you'll be able to tell the difference right away." I licked my two fingers and stuck them on the two big terminals at the bottom of the panel and learned to recognize the feeling of 220 volts of electricity running through my fingers and my hand and my arm and my leg and my toes. I told Willy I had gotten a pretty good idea already; I didn't need to try any other fuses.

### **A Janitor by Any Other Name...**

As we resume our tour, in the basement ahead of you is the janitor's workroom. Here there are a workbench and storage shelves and cabinets. This is where I keep my tools and cleaning supplies. I have another room like this in the church basement. The one in Judson House does not have the same sign on the door that the one in the church does. In Judson Church, the sign on the door says "Sanitational Engineering Consultant" (that meant me, the janitor, and it made me feel a lot more important).

I did not put up my title on my janitor's room door in Judson House because of an amazing transformation that took place, almost like Paul's miraculous conversion on the road to Damascus. In my case, I was on the way to put toilet paper in the ladies' bathroom at the foot of the front stairs. Up until then I had been only a janitor and handyman, but on that day it all changed when Howard Moody, the senior minister, came out of his private office just as I was passing through the main office area with my arms full of toilet paper. There I am and Howard comes out with a paper in his hand and tells me that he has discovered that my position at the church is really that of church "sexton." I was even "sacerdotal" and had never even known it.

As Howard told me this and explained that I was even eligible for a Baptist pension because of my intimate relations with the holy sacraments, I suddenly felt a warm rush in my cheeks and an unearthly lightness to my body (despite all the toilet paper I was hold-

ing). I was dizzy with joy. "I'm sacerdotal!" was all I could keep saying to myself as I floated down the stairs and unwrapped a roll of toilet paper and placed it gently and serenely in its little holder next to the toilet. My life was never the same again.

### **Basement Layout**

The basement has no dormitory rooms. From the south end to north, starting at Third Street, there is first a small apartment (inhabited for some time by Joan Muyskens, the church secretary, and her guard dog Lisa), then the kitchen, then the main hall stairs and janitor's room, then the Judson Lounge, and then, at the far north end, the Judson Gallery. A rear window from the main hall opposite the janitor's room has been converted to a short door, with steps going out to the garden. A similar door was made out of the rear window to the Judson Gallery.

### **The Old Kitchen**

I can picture the old kitchen as it was when the building was still an artist's residence. The metal wall cabinets have a mural painted continuously across them, and there is a lot of dark green in the mural. It is a scene or landscape, and I think people are in it. The old commercial stove is on the back wall by the courtyard. The base cabinets are of wood and also painted with scenes and people. Later I will turn these cabinets into a base for my workbench when the kitchen becomes a workshop for me.

### **Judson Lounge**

The Judson lounge has a low (tin?) ceiling, and there is dark, highly varnished exposed red brick in this room, with a structural column somewhere near the middle of the room. There is a couch and furniture here. This room is the "living room" of Judson House, one of the few rooms, other than the kitchen, gallery, or apartments, big enough to have a group of four or more people together at once. Lots of things have happened in this room.

The Judson Lounge is where I taught my home repair classes at night. The basic entrance requirements for the class were (1) to read

Plato's "Meno" dialogue, and (2) to bring in something broken, such as a portable appliance, so we could see how to "remember" to fix it. Although Arlene Carmen was always saying, "John Tungate can fix anything," it was really Plato who taught us that we already know how to fix things but have temporarily "forgotten." Zen taught us to humbly meditate on the possibility that it might be easier to buy a new appliance rather than go through the hassle to fix it. This was all before *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was published, so it is clear that the Judson Lounge was in the forefront of pioneering the Zen approach to maintenance. We had a lot of broken toasters and hair dryers left over after the class that never got fixed, but at least I got a date with Stu Silver's ex-girlfriend as a result of the class, so it wasn't a complete loss.

It was also in this room that our "communal living" group met. It included Alice Eichholtz, Tom Craft, Carol and Phil Eichling, Jane Schram, and many others. We were all eager to explore the new openness and sexual freedom of the time. It turned out to be much more difficult than we expected, not only emotionally but also in the simple mechanics of it. So, in this room I wrote my not-too-well-known ode to the sexual freedom of the sixties and seventies, "Multiple Relationships":

Multiple relationships,  
Two Janes, a Jean, and Joan,  
Can cause one lots of trouble  
When speaking on the phone.  
Your lips begin to form her name,  
Your thoughts begin to stray,  
And what comes out in syllables  
May cause you pain that day.  
So here's to sexual freedom  
And here's to telephones,  
(You'd better speak distinctly)  
Two Janes, a Jean, and Joan.

It was in the Lounge also that I had my typical conversations with Stu Silver in those days. Whoever of us entered the room would start out with a question like, "What time are they going to the airport?" The other person might respond, "They had to cancel their

flight because the limo got a flat tire on the BQE, so they're thinking of going to Rio instead." The response to this might be, "I thought Charlie's ex-wife threatened to kill him if he ever went to Rio again?" We would sometimes go on for fifteen minutes like this, never knowing where it would take us. We always played it completely straight-faced, so that someone in the room not "in the know" would not have a clue that it was all completely made up on the spot. (It has been rumored that Stu went to Hollywood and became a well-known writer for TV shows. I hope it's clear that he owes much of his success to his early formative experiences at Judson House.)

### **Runaway House and Staff Apartments**

Judson House became a runaway house in 1968. Art Levin started and sponsored this project. (He was always so quiet and unassuming about all the projects he started that it was hard to tell what Art was up to at any given time.) Some of the kids who came to stay had been living out on the street for many months. The number of runaways living on the streets of New York in those years was at epidemic proportions. Prostitution, drugs, and cold and hunger were familiar to most of them. Judson House gave them a safe place to sleep and to talk and think about their lives and to look at the realistic possibilities and decisions for their futures.

At first, I was not much involved with the runaway program. I do remember that I had to help fix up the kitchen, where a long-haired, bearded guy named Bob Lamberton cooked something that the counselors and runaways called a "macrobiotic diet." But soon I had more involvement with the runaway project than I needed. At first the kids and counselors thought I was just a nasty janitor, a straight authority-figure type. Later they all got to know me better, and then they recognized me for what I really was deep down inside—a nasty janitor, a straight authority-figure type.

### **The Runaways Fix Up Their Rooms**

With the runaways, everything started out innocently enough: "Can we borrow some paint to paint our rooms?" "Can I borrow a hammer and screwdriver for a little while?" Then it was: "Can I use your

saw for just ten minutes?” I began to think that these street kids were learning from my example and wanted to better their skills, learn a trade, make a positive move by helping to fix up Judson House. Slowly, I began to feel truly “sacerdotal.”

Then I made the mistake of going up into the dormitory floors where these runaways had their rooms, to see all the “projects” they had made with the tools, paints, and materials they had borrowed from me. “Acid trip” is a sixties term, and I’m not really sure what it means, being sacerdotal and all, but I’ll bet you twenty bucks it describes what I found on the upper floors of Judson House that day.

The first room I went to inspect stands out clearly in my memory. When I went to open the door to this room I noticed that it seemed to be hung on the outside of where it used to be and had the hinges on the wrong side. I opened this door, and inside I found a second door hung with the hinges on the opposite side. When I opened this door, I was looking into a pitch-black hole. I tried to step into the room and promptly fell over the bottom of the inner door because it had been sawed off from the upper part. The lower section of this “Dutch door” was only 18 inches high. I opened it, too, and once again stepped into the darkness. I felt the wall for the light switch I knew was there, and flicked it on. A dim light came on, but I still could barely see.

The whole room—walls, ceiling, floor, baseboards, window, window glass, light fixture, even the light bulb itself—had all been painted flat black (with my can of flat black paint). The closet door was gone; the bed was gone. Nothing in the room was the same as before the runaways came to Judson House. I retreated to my janitor’s room in the basement and tried to remember my Zen training. I locked the door with shaking hands and kept telling myself that my thoughts of strangling runaway children were inappropriate for a church janitor, especially a sacerdotal one claiming to practice Zen Buddhism.

After I had calmed down, I went back up and inspected the rest of the rooms. Some of the art work in the rooms was really very creative, consisting of psychedelic patterns, “God’s eyes,” and murals similar to some of those executed as street art on the sides of buildings on the Lower East Side. I eventually became good friends with the staff and many of the runaways, and I began to be invited to share in this macrobiotic diet thing.

## **Brown Rice and Spoon Rings**

To this day, it is hard for me to picture Judson House without also seeing brown rice, fried eggplant, God's eyes, peace symbols, and spoon rings. One very successful (supervised) project was to make rugs out of carpet remnants and carpet tape and glue. The designs often included a peace symbol or the Chinese yin/yang symbol. (If you don't know what these things are you probably aren't old enough to be reading this.) Some of the arts and crafts were made and displayed, and even sold, in the empty apartment that later became Joan Muyskens's place. Like the rest of New York's hippie generation, the runaways made bead necklaces and spoon rings. A trip to the Salvation Army thrift shop would net a whole load of old silverware to be made into spoon rings. Even I got caught up in it. My janitorial instincts did not want to waste the cutoff fork or spoon ends, so I began making cute little jewelry animals too. The tines of the forks made keen legs and the spoons could become turtles without too much effort.

## **I Teach the Runaways How to Cut Plywood**

One time, when the Runaway Project was in full swing, five or six of the kids had gathered around to watch me do some kind of repair that involved plywood. They were really impressed by all the things I could do, all the stuff I knew, and how thorough and knowledgeable I was about all my projects. They were asking me questions and getting my head all swelled up with praise and attention. By the time I was ready to cut in half this big 4x8 sheet of 3/4" plywood, I was on a roll.

I hoisted that heavy sheet up, and in one deft motion laid it flat on the folding table. As all eyes were on me, I made a quick check to see that the cord on my skill saw was clear and I carefully lined up the blade with the pencil mark on the plywood. As the group stood back in quiet admiration, I ran the saw accurately along the left side of the pencil mark and in one smooth motion cut the plywood cleanly in half. As I slid half the plywood off the table and back to the floor, it became immediately apparent that, in my great pride in my own prowess, I had somehow also managed to cut the folding table that was under the plywood, metal edge and all, cleanly in half.

A silence fell over the room as we all just looked at the cut-in-half table and tried to pretend nothing had happened out of the ordinary. Then, without another word said by anyone, one by one the kids got up and politely walked out of the room.

### **DRIFTWOOD, SOHO, AN OLD TOWN CANOE, AND THE JUDSON HOUSE KITCHEN**

From trips upstate in my canoe I used to bring back driftwood tied to the top of my bus. The canoe would go on the wood storage rack against the wall of Judson House, and the driftwood would take its place with all the other pieces of driftwood that were deposited in various hiding places around Judson House or Judson Church. There was always an extra empty room somewhere in Judson House crying out for me to fill it up with driftwood or those other special things I used to collect at night from in front of all the warehouses and small manufacturing companies south of Houston Street. In those days, there was no "SoHo" with its glitzy restaurants and art galleries. It was a strictly industrial area except for the scattering of artists' lofts. At night, if you walked the dark, empty streets south of Houston and east of West Broadway, you only found an occasional "wino" or "bag lady" barricaded for the night in some alley or doorway. Here and there the big "A.I.R." signs were painted on the shaftway of the buildings to tell the fire department, in case of a fire, that an "Artist in Residence" was living there. I used to find old packing crates and pieces of machinery or a bolt of discarded material still perfectly usable. The packing crates were of rough-cut wood from all over the world. When I planed and sanded some of those rough boards, they became strange smelling exotic hardwoods from Africa, Asia, or South America. When the Judson House basement kitchen was empty, I used it as a workshop because of its size and good lighting. Here I built an "antique" cabinet for Joan, planed my exotic woods found in SoHo, and worked on my woodcarvings and driftwood craft projects.

Also in those days, Jean Ovitt had opened a little gallery on the Lower East Side. I was a major contributor in my own right in those days, keeping Jean's gallery full of things made by me late at night in the old kitchen at Judson House. If you weren't around New York

City in the early 1970s, you would find it hard to believe how many little stores were opened up by my generation of hippies who wanted to drop out of the "capitalist society" dominated by the "military-industrial complex" (remember the sound of those words?). St. Mark's Place was only the most dense section of such stores, but you could go all over the Lower East Side and find little restaurants, leather stores, sandalmakers, candlemakers, tie-dye clothing, and of course, Jean Ovitt's store, where my driftwood tables and wood sculptures and scrap metal objets d'art and sheet metal wind chimes attracted crowds of art connoisseurs from as far away as Fourteenth Street. Today, I still have three of my "masterpieces" created in Judson House. One is carved out of a triangular end of a structural rough-cut wood beam, and another is an unfinished three-foot tall wood sculpture called "Maddono" that is currently occupying a place of honor next to the sump pump in my basement. It is a hooded figure looking at a child's face and head as a projection of his own lower anatomy, and might be considered "dirty or religiously offensive" by those not as open-minded as you and I. (This is why I put a little cover over it when the gas man comes to read the meter.)

The Maddono sculpture is from a large piece of a London Plane tree. The tree used to stand in Washington Square Park about thirty feet into the park from the northeast corner. It was cut down during the first great "renovation" of Washington Square Park in the 1970s, when the City of New York, in its great wisdom (learning from the Chicago school of sociology and wishing to give jobs to otherwise unemployable sociologists called "city planners") decided to close down Washington Square Park, put up temporary fences around it, cut down some of its large trees, and redesign it completely.

Why did they close a perfectly good park, cut down the trees, and put a construction fence around it for one year? Because it was so poorly designed to begin with? Because it was not functional as a park? Was it possibly because the police had a hard time driving vehicles through it to clear out the hippies smoking marijuana and playing bongo drums, or maybe because New York University did not like the way Washington Square Park had become a center and a symbol of the new free-spirited street life of the hippies right on the doorsteps of their expensive real estate empire?

I would not be surprised if you took a tour of all the secret rooms around Judson House and the church and found some of my driftwood art still there. Look out along the fence separating our garden from the messy store yard next door. Look in the church, up in some of the tiny rooms at the top of the spiral staircase (“stage right”), near the door that goes out to the fire escape stairs down to Judson House, and down a few steps from the “fluff room” over the sanctuary and rose window. (The lights never worked up there since the fire that buckled the lead in the rose window years ago, so take a flashlight with you.)

### A GIFT FROM THE FIREMEN

Today, in my dining room, on the top of a china closet, there is a rusted metal sculpture on a nice chestnut base with a felt bottom. It was a gift to me from eight New York City firemen who came to inspect the subbasement at Judson House one day.

The fire department in New York used to go around and inspect buildings in their precinct—especially public buildings—for fire safety and also to familiarize themselves with the interior of buildings they might one day have to enter to fight a fire.

Because Judson was such an “unorthodox” church, with theater performances in the sanctuary and dancers rehearsing in the gym, and runaways modifying the normal means of egress from bedrooms, we were always nervous and on our best behavior when the New York Fire Department wanted to inspect. I did my best to give them a good tour and made sure they liked us and weren’t going to be overly critical of the minor lapses in housekeeping that sometimes occurred as I struggled to control the “messiness” from the hundreds of “artists” (of all kinds) that practiced their trade at Judson.

On this particular inspection day I had recently cleaned up the trash that people threw down the outside wells in front of Judson House on Thompson street, so I was not too worried when they asked to see the Judson House subbasement. The subbasement door is almost one and a half stories below the sidewalk. To get to it, you first go to the corner of Thompson and Third streets, open the metal gate, and go down a few steel steps to the steel platform outside the basement apartment. Then you open another gate and go down the long flight of wooden stairs to the bottom of the stairwell.

I went down all the stairs to the door to the subbasement where they were going to inspect. I unlocked the padlock, opened the door, turned on the single light, and came back up. I was now holding open the lower steel gate just outside the apartment door so they could go down and see how nice and clean the subbasement was.

I stood there chatting with the firemen for a while as they parked their fire truck and left the driver in it to receive calls on the two-way radio. As they were preparing to go down I was talking about all those things firemen like to talk about, things like advances in rubber boot technology, the proper techniques to axe down a door, and different brands of your standard number 484 brass nozzles for 3" fire hoses. This is always a sure way to develop a good rapport with firemen.

Now, these firemen were all big men, dressed up in their big, heavy fireman's coats and hats, and carrying big flashlights, big axes, and all sorts of other big heavy tools and equipment. The first big fireman started down the wooden stairs, then the second, then the third. By the time the seventh fireman got to the top step, the first fireman had not quite reached the bottom of the very long flight of wooden stairs. There were now seven big firemen on the wooden stairs to the subbasement. Suddenly there was a groaning sound followed by a loud crack, and seven fire hats disappeared into a jumble of arms and legs, boots, and pieces of broken, rotten stair treads at the bottom of the Judson House stairwell! There were several brief loud swearwords, and then it became quiet. I was right next to the last fireman at the top of the steps, still smiling and holding the gate open for him to step off into what was now only open space. I was afraid to breathe, or stop smiling, and I didn't dare look him in the eye.

Visions of fire-prison (or wherever they send janitors who break the New York City fire regulations) began to swim in front of my eyes. But then, down below, a fireman began to snicker, then another one began to laugh. Pretty soon all eight firemen were roaring with laughter as they tried to dig out the poor guy on the very bottom. Only then did I dare breathe again and I started laughing myself.

The disheveled firemen agreed goodheartedly to not write up a violation. To show my gratitude, I gave them my special VIP tour of Judson Church. This included such popular attractions as the trap door in the stage left dressing room, the massive complex of piping

under the giant walk-in baptismal font in the sanctuary, and even the spiral staircase that starts just above the bathroom fan in the ceiling of the Garden room and goes all the way up to the “fluff room” over the rose window. I did not show them the catwalk above the sanctuary ceiling that leads to empty spaces under the roof where you could fit a good-sized apartment, or where you can look down into the sanctuary through the ceiling grilles and see whatever is going on without being seen or heard yourself. I was saving that special treat in case I had to appease them for some bigger crisis later.

After the firemen left, I set about cleaning up the broken stairs and figuring out what to do to replace them. At the top of the stairs, the main support had been a small steel I beam that was anchored into the bricks on each side. It had rusted badly over time and had pulled out of the wall completely. As I removed it from the opposite wall, still stuck to part of the bricks, it looked strangely like two long-necked swans, one with head outstretched, and one with its neck slightly bent. I took the rusted beam into the Judson House kitchen and attached it to a nice piece of chestnut that I later carefully sanded and finished. I then glued a piece of felt on the bottom of the chestnut base, and, “Voilà,” as we say in the art world, there was an instant piece of art!

## **AL'S APARTMENT IN JUDSON HOUSE**

No matter what other people might tell you, I had nothing to do with the construction of Al's apartment in Judson House. When I first saw it, it had already been “renovated” by Bruce Mailman, one of Al's theater people.

The first time I saw it was not long after I first started work at Judson. Al told me there was “something wrong with his toilet,” and could I take a look at it. This was the first time I saw Al's “wide innocent eyes” look, and his “I'm so helpless” body language, both of which I came to know only too well over the years.

Once I found my way to the sunken bathroom and toilet (“second door, stage left”) and flushed it, I realized that somewhere under that false floor of built-up plywood and indoor-outdoor carpeting someone had hooked up the hot instead of the cold water to the toilet, so that every time Al flushed his toilet a little cloud of steam would rise out of the bowl and slowly make its way up toward the

ceiling. I don't know why Al was upset about it—who likes a cold toilet seat anyway?

Going inside Al's apartment from the hall, you had to go up some steps to a long, narrow, raised walkway that ran to the far end of the big living room, which was sunken down on your right.

Off on your left were, first, the bedroom, then the bathroom, and then the kitchen, but only the kitchen floor was at the same level as the walkway. The bedroom and part of the bathroom were at the original floor level, so there was a "sunken bedroom" and a "sunken bathtub."

Except for Al's grand piano at one end and the built-in bookcases along one wall, you saw nothing but wall-to-wall gray indoor-outdoor carpet and a couple of gray carpet-covered cubes for furniture. It was the perfect space for loud music, serious drinking, and wild dancing. The opening and closing nights of Al's plays at Judson always included a party at Al's apartment. These cast parties usually included at least one "set" of songs with Al at the piano, and always some Bessie Smith records. Al's parties always came with excitement and fear. There was always the exciting possibility of getting carried away, of losing control, and there was always the fear that you might give in to feelings and desires you tried to keep hidden deep inside. An opening-night party in Al's apartment, with its flat gray indoor-outdoor carpet, was the bare stage for all those raw and tender and hopeful things that might come true, and then again might not. Disappointment, sadness, and loneliness could be found there, too. I won't tell you how it felt to leave alone after all the night's possibilities and hopes were gone. Those stories and memories belong to those of us who were there.

## JUDSON GALLERY

The Judson Gallery next to the Lounge was empty a lot of the time I was there. It had been used more regularly when Judson House was the Judson Student House and full of mostly art students. In the 1960s, many artists had become caught up in experimental art forms that usually involved action or participation by the audience. It was called "Performance Art" or "Happenings," and some of this took place in the Judson Gallery. Art was also becoming highly politicized in those days. One of the artists, Jean Toche, with long hair and

bushy beard and twinkling eyes, called himself “The President in Exile of the Walloon States of Belgium.” He and Jon Hendricks and other artists at the gallery played an important role in my own transformation from a crew-cut ex-G.I. janitor in combat boots to a long-haired, bearded advocate of Zen, who wore beads and a sari (any other generation would probably call it a dress) and who attended at least one antiwar rally. Actually, I was a Zen Buddhist before I went in the army, but the rest of my transformation took place at Judson, aided and abetted by these shy-looking, soft-spoken artists.

### **EX-G.I. JANITOR BECOMES HIPPIE ANTIWAR PROTESTER**

Before an upcoming antiwar rally in Washington, D.C., Jon Hendricks asked if I would help him and other participants get ready by driving my Volkswagen bus to pick up some “supplies” they needed. Since most people around Judson did not have a car, and almost no one had an off-street parking lot like I did, behind Judson House, I of course agreed to help.

We drove to the West Village over by the Hudson River between 14th Street and Little West 12th Street, where the wholesale meat district is. The meat district was more active then, in 1969 and 1970, and there were huge beef carcasses hanging off hooks outside in the street on overhead steel tracks, waiting to be wheeled inside where rows of thick-armed butchers in blood-spattered white clothes were laughing and talking and chopping up big pieces of dead animals into smaller ones to be sold as “cuts of meat” in the food stores all over the city. Jon Hendricks bought no less than twenty plastic one-gallon bottles of cow’s blood, and pounds of raw intestines, pig’s hearts, and other ugly-looking internal organs.

I don’t know where we hid it all in Judson House overnight (nobody told Arlene, thank goodness). The next morning when the charter buses arrived to take everyone down to Washington for the rally, Jon had everything all neatly wrapped up and looking innocuous enough, as he loaded it into the luggage compartment under the bus. Jon gave everyone their final instructions on the bus, and that’s when I heard of his plan. He had even held “rehearsals” in the preceding days to tell the others what to expect from the police, from the media, and from other people at the rally.

Once we got down to Washington and joined the other marchers, the "Performance" planned by Jon Hendricks began. We opened the packages on the street and then stuffed the various entrails and organs inside our clothing, with parts of them hanging out of our shirts or pants so they looked like they were part of our own bodies. We looked as if we had been cut open or blown apart, but were still alive. Then we took the gallon jugs and poured the blood all over each other and over our clothing. We were careful to throw away the empty containers in the public garbage cans, as Jon had told us, so the police could not arrest us for "littering."

We tied ourselves together in a long line and limped and hobbled, chanting "Stop the war, stop the killing." Some of the women in the group were screaming. It was probably on the news—if not I'll bet the FBI has tapes of it all. We did not last the whole march. We walked for maybe ten blocks, screaming, shouting, and wailing. We not only horrified many of the people around us but we ourselves began to forget we were only acting and started to lose our sense of control. Someone in our group started sobbing, and then someone else threw up. It became hard to tell the difference between the horror I was pretending to feel and the horror I was beginning to experience. Some of us started crying uncontrollably and others were shaking and unable to shout anymore. We sat down on the ground and we held each other and stopped trying to speak as the crowd of marchers surged around us and the flies buzzed at the sticky blood drying on our faces and hands.

We were completely drained. We had not been prepared for what we, ourselves, were going to feel. We untied ourselves from the line joining us and removed all the guts from inside our clothing, and put it all in the trash receptacles nearby, as the police watched our every move. We were still barely able to talk as we rejoined the marchers. The police lost sight of us as we were surrounded by the thousands of other bodies and carried along. When we got to where the huge outdoor fountains were, we jumped into the cool pool water to wash off the sticky blood. The water around us turned slowly red. I looked up and the water pouring out from the fountain above us was red with blood ... gallons and gallons, red with blood.

## JUDSON HOUSE AND WINOS

Even though I was a sacerdote, I still had to perform certain unsacerdotal functions that nobody else seemed willing to do. One of the unfortunate functions that went along with being the janitor was that of bouncer and policeman.

Our front door was the boundary between the “no drinking” zone enforced in Washington Square Park and the last place you could finish off your cheap wine after walking from the nearest liquor store at Bleecker and Thompson streets (in the same building as the Village Gate). The winos would all stop at our front steps to argue and shout, and to finish off their Ripples and Thunderbirds. They would then leave the empty bottles or break them right there, or else would throw them over the railing into the well down to the subbasement for me to clean up with all the other trash and litter that people threw down as they passed by Judson House. I was constantly battling the winos and street people who used the front steps as their own private bar and lounge.

## THE JUDSON GARDEN COMMITTEE

Since I was a sacerdote and also the total maintenance staff at Judson, I was also an un-official member of both the Judson Building Committee and the Judson Garden Committee. One day the Garden Committee had a big cleanout party. I don't recall where everything came from, and the Building Committee might have been involved, too. I don't know if Ken McNutt was already the chairperson for the Building Committee, but he did chair that committee for many years while I was at Judson.

You have to understand that the Judson Community was forced by necessity to have people play multiple roles. Just as “multipurpose space” was a building committee buzzword in those days, people around Judson were multipurpose and often were on more than one committee. So it might have been both committees that held a cleanout of Judson Garden and Judson House. The effort netted so much stuff to get rid of that we had to get one of those big rental vans and call the New York City Sanitation Department to see where we could dump it.

**"STOPPING BY THE FOUNTAIN AVENUE LANDFILL  
ON A (NON) SNOWY MORNING . . ."**

In those days New York City had several landfills or garbage dumps open at any one time. There was no such thing as recycling. "Saving the environment" was a phrase not yet in use. So instead of recycling we got to take all the stuff we found around Judson to a "landfill."

The New York Sanitation Department gave us a special permit to dump at the Fountain Avenue Landfill, in Brooklyn. None of us had ever been to the landfill before, but some of us had seen it and smelled it as we drove by on the Belt Parkway on the way to Long Island or Jones Beach. We piled the huge rental truck full of old furniture and junk and then drove to Brooklyn with our special permit. As we drove toward Fountain Avenue, off in the distance hung what looked like a cloud over a low mountain, except the cloud kept changing shape. As we got close, we could see that the cloud was really thousands of seagulls hovering over the mountain of garbage.

From the security gate, where a guard checked our permit, we could now see that this "mountain" had a road going up to the top and that the road had a long line of white garbage trucks on it. We now entered another world. The sun was blocked out as if by an eclipse. We entered a dark landscape where there was no earth and no sky. The smell was everywhere, and our ears were filled with the high-pitched screams from the thousands of seagulls that hovered just above us, darting down past the truck windows to land for a moment and then take off again.

The road up was the only flat surface, shiny and smoothed by all the truck tires. Everywhere else the ground was made up of pieces of something unrecognizable, a flattened surface of garbage here and there punctuated by a piece of jagged metal or pipe sticking up into the air. We inched our way up the slope in the endless line of garbage trucks. When the line stopped, we realized that the shaking was not just the engine of our truck. The whole mountain was moving and rumbling, and ahead a roaring sound could be heard or maybe felt above the crying of the gulls. As we approached the top, the garbage suddenly leveled out. One by one the trucks in front of us turned and disappeared to someplace we could not see, on the other side. Nearby a flagman signaled to us to move forward. As we came over the crest of the hill, we saw a small valley filled with all the white

garbage trucks with their backs raised into the air, each backing or moving away from a different spot on the cliff.

A bulldozer was coming right toward us, pushing ahead of it the flopping and flailing corpses of bedroom sets and TVs, couches and ironing boards. As we watched, another man signaled to us impatiently to turn around and back the truck toward the edge of the cliff. The bulldozer was right next to us now, missing us by only two feet, close enough to feel the heat from its engine and feel the rental truck swaying from the weight of the bulldozer as it compressed the garbage under our wheels. The noise was deafening, and we could not hear each other's shouts from a few feet away. All around us was noise and movement as if a Hieronymus Bosch painting had come alive. White trucks with their back compartments being hydraulically lifted up on an angle into the air looked like huge insects with their abdomens arched and distended, depositing their eggs on the fetid soil. Around our heads were swarms of seagulls diving headlong and fighting over the garbage, trying to get the freshest rotted food and meat before it was consumed by the waiting maggots and clouds of flies around us. With the earth shaking and accompanied by the screaming of the gulls and the smell of rotted flesh, we struggled to unload our rental truck in the strange light. We drove away from there as fast as we could.

The Fountain Avenue landfill is closed now, but that day, the Judson Garden Committee, like Odysseus before them, were among those few who actually visited Hell and returned to tell about it.

---

**JOHN TUNGATE**

runs a construction business in Bedford Hills, New York.