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# Robert Newman

Robert Newman lived at Judson House as a full-time student from early 1948 until he graduated in 1951. He wrote the following letter in October 1976 on the occasion of Howard Moody's twentieth anniversary as senior minister at Judson Memorial Church. It is one of several letters exchanged between Robert Newman and Paul Spike, son of the late Robert Spike, who was Judson's senior minister from 1948 to 1955. Paul Spike's letter on the same occasion is included in the section on "The Judson Staff." Both letters are reprinted here by permission of Robert Newman and Paul Spike. \_\_\_\_\_

I will try to recall: Veterans were trying to re-adjust. The schools were full and expanding. College was possible because of government checks. Generations that had never imagined advanced education enrolled. If there weren't many jobs yet, this was a polite way to keep it together. "Are you 52-20 or VA?" (\$20 a week for 52 weeks or Veteran's Administration scholarship). NYU accepted everyone, explaining that it would weed out those not meeting its standards later. Everyone deserved a chance. At the beginning of 1948, still seventeen, I transferred from a lousy small college in northern New Jersey (disillusioned because I was getting A's with less work than high school, where my record was undistinguished, and my effort nonexistent).

Tuition was \$13.50 a point; sixteen points was a full schedule. I was not a veteran, and my father was a clothing salesman finally climbing out of the depression and paying off a judgment for automobile homicide. A drunk had wandered across the highway as he was returning from the store at one a.m. after finishing the annual inventory. We were not insured (couldn't afford it) and the lawsuit hung over us for years.

I found a job at the NYU library. As a full-time employee of the university, twelve tuition points were paid for. I was taking eighteen points, and my salary and some help from my Uncle Willie covered expenses and the other six points. I lived in a furnished room at Tenth Avenue and Eighteenth Street, paying \$8 a

week for a couple of months, but it was a bad room, and too far to get to during breaks in a library and class schedule that sometimes began at eight a.m. and lasted until midnight. One of the girls in my shift in the reference room had a friend who lived in a room behind the church just across Washington Square. He could roll out of bed and be in class in ten minutes. It took me almost half an hour. She would tell me when Dominic came into the library next.

Dominic didn't think there were any vacancies, and explained that it was a "student house" with a minister in charge. A chemistry professor [Robert Boyd] and his wife lived there rent-free in return for overseeing the cleaning and kitchen details. Rent was \$7 a week if there was a room. The minister's name was Dean Wright. Dean? "That's his first name, here's his phone number. His wife is blond and sings at Radio City Music Hall."

## MOVING INTO JUDSON HOUSE

The minister was six or seven years older than I was. I said I was Jewish, but didn't observe anything. He said it didn't matter, but from what I had said, it didn't look like I had enough free time to contribute to the "program." I really needed a room that close to school, I said. He said they would only accept me on the condition that I contribute twelve hours a week to the "program." I said I would try.

The "program" was volleyball on Friday nights, followed by beer at Minetta's until very drunk, and dishwashing and occasional cooking for the group when we ate together, and taking turns cleaning the halls and stairs. There were about a dozen of us in a building that has since fallen down at 81 West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, which connected to the top floor of another building on Thompson Street. The lower floors housed the Judson Health Center. All of this was just behind Judson Memorial Church.

I was one of the youngest in the group, which ranged from seventeen to about thirty. Some were vets, there were a couple of students from the Republic of China. Men lived on the top floor, women in "81." They came from the Midwest, the South, were black, white, and Italian, and one girl was Jewish and unattractive.

## WRIGHT AND SPIKE

The Wrights had friends they had met while doing student work in Ohio who were coming to live and work at the church while the husband completed his doctorate at Columbia. The Spikes moved in, Bob and Alice and their eighteen-month-old son, Paul. They had lived in the house for about a week before I met Bob Spike. He and Dean were passing the time of day in the office; it was Saturday morning and the house was fairly empty. I was on my way out somewhere. C'mon in and meet each other. They were both very bright. But they weren't Jewish. In 1948, at eighteen, it didn't yet jibe. Also, they read the *New York Post*.

They didn't know me any better than I knew them. I had read a little as a kid as the result of an automobile accident that put me in the hospital for six weeks and with the oral surgeon and orthodontist three or four times a week for years after. My reading was wide but not deep, and kind of spotty. But I had almost a trick memory and could put things together fast.

They were both doctoral candidates at Columbia, had finished college and seminary, knew all of Niebuhr, Tillich and Sartre, talked about Camus. They were both skilled in logic and debate, were charming, witty and sharp, new in New York, and in every sense, very easy to take.

Dean had seen a Bosch print in a Fourth Avenue bookstore. It was of a medieval fair where one of the figures is drawing the crowd into a shell game. Ancient three-card monte. A week before he'd asked the price and was told \$8. Now he decided to buy it. The three of us went to the bookstore, and as we were about to enter, I said I would do the talking. Pointing at random to a Rembrandt print, I asked, how much? "Eight dollars." I pointed to another print. "Five dollars." Now I pointed carelessly to the Bosch, as we started to edge out of the store. "Three dollars." OK, we'll take it. Magic. They were that American. We could learn from each other, and did.

A group of us drove to Washington for a couple of days. We did congressional offices, and were excited about the former pharmacist from Minneapolis who showed great promise. We met with his administrative assistant, Max Kempleman, who had been a staff member of the *Manchester Guardian*. We went to the State Department,

and tried to psych out the system. Howard Moody was there with some of his students from Ohio State. We had already met on a trip to New Haven, the year before, when Dean's wife, Margaret Wright, opened there in *As You Like It* with Katherine Hepburn. Howard was finishing at Yale Divinity School, and because of Margaret, we knew about Hepburn and Tracy (and her chauffeur looked like Tracy, too).

Spike had raked the backyard one autumn afternoon, and found a couple of used condoms among the leaves. We didn't know whose they were, but the house was a good place to live.

There were hundreds of afternoons at the Cedar bar, nights at the Remo and Minetta's, where the world was explored, settled, and resettled. We cooked sheep liver at 19 cents a pound, and drank Senator beer from the A&P. My mother visited and told either Dean or Spike, or both, that if I ever converted, she'd kill herself. I was a "Student Associate Member—No Creedal Obligation."

John Mitchell was a waiter at the Remo. He later opened the "Fat Black Pussycat" and other bars and coffeehouses, here and abroad. He had run into trouble with one of his marriages, and came to trust and depend on Spike. The church became a place you could get help, whether you were from MacDougal or the Bowery—though we were edgy with those. Max Bodenheim's wife hid out with us when he beat her (she said), and we discovered trunks full of the papers of Earl Browder in the subbasement, stashed there in the thirties.

Paul [Spike] was a terrific kid, and we really took to each other. I was eighteen and he was two. We spent a fair amount of time together. I took him with me to the bar around the corner on Sullivan Street. He put his finger into the head on my beer and announced, "Soap!" By the time he was four or five, he was writing paragraphs on small sheets of paper. Handing them to us, he would ask, "Sign my contract?" His brother John had recently been born, and I remember Alice nursing him during Sunday services, sitting in the back of the church. Paul started school at St. Luke's.

I met my wife in the library. She worked at Stechert-Hafner's on Tenth Street. We married in the last month of my twentieth year (her

twenty-second). She had been going with a painter who worked with me. Since that time, twenty-seven years ago, we have all stayed connected, one way or another.

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**ROBERT NEWMAN**

lives in Bay Harbor Islands, Florida.