

## **My Back Pages: Grinnell, Activism, and the Late 1960s**

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I grew up in rural and small town Iowa. My earliest memories are from living on my father's small (and poor) farm in the center of the state. When I was 10 years old, our family moved to a small town of about 200 residents, and for the rest of my upbringing until my senior year in high school, I lived in a series of small towns with between 200 and 450 residents. We moved around inside the borders of Iowa just about every two years, and finally in my senior year we moved to Cedar Falls, which had a population of over 20,000 at that time. Moving to Cedar Falls was a bit of a "personal liberation" for me, because Cedar Falls High was big enough to have a whole "crowd" of "smart kids," who all got bunched together in classes. My horizons expanded considerably my senior year (1965-1966), because I was no longer the exception, the nerdy "smart kid" who was often disliked for not being more "normal" (fixated on hot rod cars, sports, etc.). Both my parents were teachers in the local public school system wherever we lived, and that only furthered my isolation from most other kids. Cedar Falls made me feel more normal, more like somebody who could have a meaningful life without always being an outsider.

But that was nothing compared to what Grinnell College did to me. My college freshman year (1966-1967) I attended the University of Northern Iowa in hometown Cedar Falls, lived at home with my parents, and worked in local pizza restaurants and the local Howard Johnson hotel. It was not a great year; in many respects it felt like high school with an additional burden of working a job after school and on weekends. A couple of my fellow graduates from Cedar Falls High came home on some weekends and at Christmas break that year with wonderful tales from this college called Grinnell College. Grinnell had never even entered into my consciousness until then – I always knew that I would be going to a public university in Iowa because neither my parents nor I could afford anything more expensive. But my former classmates told me Grinnell had a policy of never turning away for financial reasons a qualified student who otherwise could attend – the college would provide a scholarship up to the amount needed to make it possible to go there. So, I applied to transfer to Grinnell College for my sophomore year, and much to my amazement, they accepted me and gave me a scholarship large enough to make it possible for me to attend, as long as I worked summers to augment the meager amount my parents would pay.

So there I was in the fall of 1967 at Grinnell College. I found the experience to be exhilarating. Students came from all over the United States. Many of them seemed so sophisticated, and I marveled at their diversity. They and some of the professors introduced me to ideas I had never encountered previously. Young people were rebelling and rejecting 1950s cultural norms with "uptight" attitudes about drug usage and sexual behavior. Grinnell opened up a whole new world to this small town Iowa boy whose previous horizons had been both narrow and subjectively stifling.

I found radical politics to be one of the big "draws." I rejected the U.S. war in Vietnam; I did not want to be drafted to kill or be killed on the other side of the globe for no better apparent reason than to protect American economic and consequent geopolitical interests. By the time of my graduation in May of 1970, I would seriously consider either jail or going to Canada to avoid fighting in that war. In the intervening years, I would attend literally dozens of anti-war demonstrations and actions. I am still immensely proud of that anti-war protest movement, and consider its contribution to ending the war as one of the crowning achievements of the 1965-1975 years.

But the Vietnam War was only a part of the whole picture. On the campus, we were in revolt against the “in loco parentis” rules of the college which were aimed at forcing 1960s college students into the mold of repressed 1950s American culture. African-Americans were struggling for freedom during those years. We supported all facets of their struggle, from the mass non-violent demonstrations of Martin Luther King to more radical movements and organizations such as the “Black Power” movement and the Black Panther Party in some American inner cities. Other “minorities” in American society, such as Latinos and native Americans, also demanded equality and liberation. Women rebelled against their second class status, creating the modern Women’s Liberation movement. Men in “the movement” such as me found this new movement both an inspiration and a very personal challenge because we had inherited and often practiced male chauvinist perspectives and practices. My girlfriend throughout my Grinnell years, Sally Hamann, played a leading role in the Grinnell women’s liberation movement; she put me through many painful personal confrontations that in retrospect were immensely valuable in teaching me lessons about the oppression of half of the human race, however distressing they often were. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people created yet another “personal liberation” movement at this time, although this was mostly only a glimmering of a future freedom movement during my years at Grinnell. In the late 1960s the youth rebellion extended into working class communities and factories, creating wildcat strikes and a labor rebellion unseen since. We also embraced a growing environmental movement during those years.

Within weeks of my arrival on campus, I involved myself in the radical student movement. We initially used a short-lived local coffee shop called “In Loco Parentis” as headquarters for putting out the Grinnell “underground” newspaper, *Pterodactyl*. (Later, *Ptero* folded and we replaced it with the paper *High and Mighty* in my senior year.) We also founded a “guerrilla theater group” that engaged in various confrontational performances on an off campus. I remember participating in a number of “study groups” where we studied contemporary left theorists such as Herbert Marcuse and others. I particularly found appealing the radical currents that attempted to fuse the “politics” with the “youth culture” sweeping the country. I remember organizing giant communal dinners where we all ate stew out of a huge pot as a gesture toward a more communitarian way of life than what we saw as the sterility of many isolated lives.

For the most part we avoided affiliation with any of the national student groups, such as Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Personally, I found SDS and similar groups to be overly dogmatic during this period – different factions were splintering over doctrinal differences. At Grinnell we created for a period a group called the Grinnell Student Movement. I always liked that aspect of Grinnell’s student movement – it had room for a variety of viewpoints and never tried to impose one particular ideological variant on all who wanted to participate. And we participated in demonstrations by the dozens, usually against the Vietnam War.

So I was right there in the middle of most aspects of the upheaval at Grinnell during those days: the “nude-in” against *Playboy* magazine’s exploitation of women’s bodies for profit; running a man for Homecoming Queen (he won, although the college refused to accept the outcome); the seizure of the Reserve Officers Training Corp (ROTC) building and a subsequent sit-in; “Be-Ins” featuring everything from free food to body painting to political speeches, the confrontation with Professor John Crossett and his disciples over flying the American flag on campus or removing it as a sign of distress over occurrences in Vietnam, turning a public trial of a male student for keeping a female in his dorm room into a “spectacle” indictment of the college and its dorm room policies, shutting down the campus in the spring of 1970 after the murders of students at Kent State and Jackson State, and numerous other activities that attracted less widespread campus or media attention. Cumulatively these events

transformed my life and made me a lifelong activist to right wrongs as I perceive them. I've never regretted that transformation; to the contrary, I consider it a gift and largely an accident of the time at which I came of age politically. And it definitely is a gift Grinnell bequeathed on me, for few places at the time that were accessible to me provided as much latitude to explore ideas and lifestyles as did Grinnell.

Despite some ups and downs, I found the times to be intoxicating, personally liberating, and mostly enjoyable. I wouldn't trade it for anything, despite some second thoughts about certain aspects of my behavior and the behavior of my fellow campus radicals. I still think that we justly fought against many forms of oppression. I now realize that some of our excesses, where they existed, were somewhat inevitable given our inexperience and youth in a context without a more experienced viable "left" to guide us as we fought "the system."

Looking back on those years, I am most critical of my certainty of the absolute truth of my beliefs. A little more humility would have been an asset. I wish we "radicals" had engaged in a larger number of respectful forums and discussions with thoughtful liberals and conservatives on campus to supplement our confrontations and demonstrations. Had we done so, I am convinced that everybody would have emerged with deeper understandings of our world. That said, I am very proud that the Grinnell left never degenerated into the worst "wrong paths" that some on the left took at that time. I vividly remember the universal rejection by the Grinnell contingent of the "Weatherman" faction of SDS when it exhorted us to go out and "trash" a Chicago neighborhood during the "Days of Rage" in the fall of 1969 as a way of opposing the Vietnam War. I also remember with equal clarity an incident that in hindsight I now recognize was probably a police entrapment effort. In the spring of 1970 the Grinnell campus had been shut down in protest of a Vietnam War escalation and the murder of students at Kent State and Jackson State universities. I was approached by a student whom I hardly knew who told me he knew someone in the town of Grinnell who offered us dynamite to blow up something, perhaps the local draft board office, if we wanted to make a statement against the war. I immediately and unequivocally rejected the offer, stating that the war would only be ended when we won over the majority of the American people to oppose it, not by isolated terrorist tactics like bombings.

I most value the way my undergraduate learning at Grinnell combined with intense activity to put "book learning" into practice. The times and the place were a "living laboratory" to test out new ideas and theories. I remember serious engagement with multiple theoretical frameworks to try to explain the times I was living through: liberalism, Marxism in one of its many variants, non-Marxist socialism, Social Democracy, anarchism, feminism, "Third Worldism," black nationalism, varieties of ecological theory, theories of "youth culture," cultural and economic conservative theories, and more. Living in less intense times, my two sons never encountered insistent demands to engage in explanatory theories of this nature when they went to college in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

I know that activism at Grinnell touched most other Grinnell students less deeply or less permanently than it changed me. It affected most in some important way, I am convinced, and most positively at that. Some Grinnellians were probably negatively impacted, either through personal experience or through horrified observation of the actions of people like me. For that reason, I will be curious to see others' reflections on the activism so prevalent at Grinnell during those years. Perhaps by reading each others' recollections on and assessments of those times, we will be able to construct a more complete picture of Grinnell in 1965-1975.