

Time capsule

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 5, 2000](#) issue

The only college paper I saved was written when I was a sophomore. Dated “Thanksgiving 1946,” it turned up a couple of years ago in my files. My assignment had been to “picture what you’ll be like and what you’ll be doing in January 2000.” My essay was, of course, jejune and is, of course, embarrassing, but since January 2000 has come, here goes:

I imagined that I would be wearier than I am: “What I have had to say I have said. A new generation has risen . . . with something new to say,” I wrote. I pictured having preached my last sermon in 1997, ending a long career in the ministry. “I would rather have been a musician than anything else in the world: I bitterly envied the performing artist.” Still do. “Alas, I was not technically equipped.” Still am not. Reflecting on my choice of vocation, I wrote, “My paternal grandfather was probably the greatest influence on my choice.” During our long walks on the farm I had found him “Christian, acute and soulful.” And he urged ministry, not writing, on me.

Imagining myself in 2000, I hoped “that now I am as I was in the field with grandfather, as I was on the rainy September morning when my parents, with faith for me in their hearts, sent me to prep school and college—a child with ideals. Were my grandfather, my parents, my early friends with me now, I hope, in Robert Frost’s words, ‘They would not find me changed from him they knew,/ Only more sure of what he thought was true.’”

The war had ended 14 months before that long-ago Thanksgiving. My class was one year too young to have been called up, though upperclassmen (it was an all-male school) had enlisted and some had been killed. We were very atom-bomb conscious. The cold war was beginning. No wonder I predicted that “most of the years of our lives [would be] turbulent and clouded. The evening, now, seems quietest. Momentarily there can be no war. Man hates as ever, but enemies fear the secrets of new warfare.”

My English professor liked the paper but wrote that “in one or two places I would have preferred a sharper image.” That could have been one of the places. I must

have meant that atomic weaponry was so fearsome that all stood back in horror from using it, and thus from engaging in war. If so, I was a bit naïve about human ingenuity, since we certainly have found new ways to put old hates to work without using “The Bomb.”

Some things have not turned out the way I thought they would. I expected to spend my entire career in the pastorate, with writing as a secondary vocation. Quirks of fate turned that around and I’ve mainly been writing and teaching. Still, I respond happily when people call me pastor, and I am convinced that the pastorate would have been a fulfilling lifelong career.

The Frost quote is troublesome. All of us who are given long years have to work hard to remember what we were sure of when we were young. In respect to my philosophy of life, theology and understandings of truth, I hope I have grown and changed. But this examination of my mind and soul also suggests great continuities in truth, values, faith and vocation.

Now, as I restore the essay of 1946 to its time capsule—or to the wastebasket—I have to decide what I want to be and hold as truth while I grow and change with the new century.