

My first convert

by [Eugene H. Peterson](#) in the [September 23, 1998](#) issue

I grew up in a Christian home with good parents. I was told the story of Jesus and instructed in the right way to live. I was loved and treated well. Childhood in my memory was a fair approximation of the garden of Eden--a good and wonderful creation.

Our modest house was on a gravel road on the edge of a small Montana town, three or four blocks beyond where the sidewalks ended. It was a neighborhood with plenty of playmates, none of whom went to church, but their unbaptized state never seemed to make any difference in that preschool life of games (kick-the-can, hide-and-seek, softball) and imagination (pretending to be explorers like Lewis and Clark and Indians like Chief Joseph and Sacajawea). There were trees to climb and a creek to swim in. There was a meadow bordering our backyard in which cows grazed. We used the dried cowflop for bases in our ball games.

And then I went off to school and discovered what the Gospel of John calls "the world"--those people who do not regard God with either reverence or obedience. This knowledge came into my life in the person of Garrison Johns, the school bully. Garrison (not his actual name) lived in a log house a couple of hundred yards beyond where I lived, the yard littered with rusted-out trucks and cars. I was in that house only once; it was a cold winter day and his mother, a beautiful willowy woman as I remember her, invited me and the Mitchell twins in to warm us up with a bowl of moose meat chili that was simmering on the back of the wood stove.

I had never seen Garrison up close. He wore a red flannel shirt, summer and winter, and walked with something of a swagger that I admired and tried to imitate. Being a year older than I and living just far enough away, he was beyond the orbit of my neighborhood games and friendships. I knew of his reputation for meanness, but the memory of his mother's kindness tempered my apprehension. I wasn't prepared for what was to come.

Eventually, Garrison discovered me and took me on as his project for the year and gave me a working knowledge of what 25 years later Richard Niebuhr would give me

a more sophisticated understanding of--the tension between Christ and culture. I had been taught in Sunday school not to fight and so had never learned to use my fists. I had been prepared for the wider world of neighborhood and school by memorizing "Bless those who persecute you" and "Turn the other cheek." I don't know how Garrison Johns knew that about me--some sixth sense that bullies have, I suppose--but he picked me for his sport. Most afternoons after school he would catch me and beat me up. He also found out that I was a Christian and taunted me with "Jesus-sissy."

I tried finding alternate ways home by making detours through alleys, but he stalked me and always found me. I arrived home every afternoon, bruised and humiliated. My mother told me that this had always been the way of Christians in the world and that I had better get used to it. I was also supposed to pray for him.

I loved going to school--I was learning a lot, finding new friends, adoring my teacher. The classroom was a wonderful place. But after the dismissal bell each day I had to face Garrison Johns and get my daily beating.

March came. There were still patches of snow here and there, but the days were getting longer--I was no longer walking home in the dark. And then something unexpected happened. I was with my neighborhood friends on this day, seven or eight of them, when Garrison caught up with us and started in on me, jabbing and taunting, working himself up to the main event.

That's when it happened--something totally uncalculated, totally out of character. Something snapped in me. The Bible verses disappeared from my consciousness and I grabbed Garrison. To my surprise, and his, I realized that I was stronger than he. I wrestled him to the ground, sat on his chest and pinned his arms to the ground with my knees. I couldn't believe it--he was helpless under me. It was too good to be true. I hit him in the face with my fists. It felt good and I hit him again--blood spurted from his nose, a lovely crimson on the snow. By this time all the other children were cheering, egging me on. "Black his eyes! Bust his teeth!"

I said to Garrison, "Say 'Uncle.'" He wouldn't say it. I hit him again. More blood, More cheering. Now the audience was bringing the best out of me. And then my Christian training reasserted itself. I said, "Say, 'I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.'" And he said it. Garrison Johns was my first convert.

Garrison Johns was my introduction into the world, the "world" that "is not my home." He was also my introduction to how effortlessly that same "world" could get into me, making itself at home under cover of my Christian language and "righteous" emotions.

That happened 60 years ago. I have recently taken up residence once more in the Montana valley where I grew up. The other day I drove down the street where I obtained Garrison John's confession and pointed out the spot to my wife. When I got home I thought, "I wonder what has come of Garrison Johns?"

I opened the telephone book. Sure enough, his name is listed with an address that locates him about ten miles away. Should I call him up? Would he remember? Is he still a bully? Did the ill-gotten Christian confession "take"? Would a meeting result in a personal preview of Armageddon in which I would end up on the losing side? I haven't called him yet. I am putting off the judgment.