

MR. & MRS. J. EUGENE FELCH III

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KEENE, NEW HAMPSHIRE

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Sally: I was talking about my father-in-law's habits...I don't remember what it was. I probably have the least to tell of anyone since I knew Jon a much shorter period of time. Of course, I think Gene told you, I'm not a Keene girl so I didn't really meet Jon until...

2: Why don't you tell him about Liza, Sally...

Sally: Oh, I forgot all about that. She was the flower girl in our wedding. At that time she was six years old. And, of course, I was so high and so excited that I was really unaware of what she was doing or who she was talking to or anything, but she became very attached to Jon while she was there which was really only a couple of days. And she proceeded to tell her friends that she had a boyfriend. Or if people asked if she had a boyfriend she'd say yes and she'd tell them on Daniels and that he'd be a minister...And we had pictures made of the group that was in our wedding, ushers, bridesmaids and the flower girl. And we gave one to the flower girl and one to each of the other members of the wedding party. So she took hers to school to show it to all of her friends. And she was a quiet little girl to start with. But they have a share and tell period at the beginning of the school day. She got up in first grade and proceeded to show the picture of the wedding and tell how during the summer she was a flower girl in this wedding. We went home last summer in August and we went across the backyard to see her, and she, right away, said, "How's Jon?" She talked to you about it first, didn't she, Gene?

2: She asked about Jon and everything...and it came out later, of course, that she'd been writing letters to Jon

Sally: Oh, yes. She was writing letters to him of course. She wasn't mailing them, or she thought her mother was mailing them, but the letters weren't mailed. I don't think they knew where he was--even if they...I mean, I suppose they might have sent a Christmas card or something. So anyway she had written him these letters and everything. Well, when they first got the news, they didn't tell her for a couple of days. I guess she was just really--I guess she understood it...quite upset.

3: I think Ethel was--had--some comments about way back when.

Ethel: Well, of course, I have known him since he was quite a young boy. I think perhaps when Jon first came here he might have been fifth or sixth grade. And we went through the usual things to do with children of that age...the little pranks and things and jokes and so forth. Then, one night he had dinner with us, and this was the first time that I became aware that he was a little unusual in that he commented on the books he had been reading. And he mentioned The Robe. Well, of course, you don't expect a boy that age to read The Robe and be deeply interested in it and comment on it as he did. And then I think he mentioned perhaps along about that time The Silver Chalice, and that was the sort of thing. Now, you would expect a boy his age to be reading adventures stories perhaps or science fiction was becoming popular. But after that Jon and I had many, many talks about religion. We might start to talk about something else, but it would end up on religion. And he was always groping, looking for answers even then when he was quite young. And that went on all through high school...this question in his mind about he wanted the right answers, and we used to sometimes...I'd laugh about it with him. And I used to say, "You know, Jon, you'll never be satisfied until you go all the way to Rome." And he would say, "Well, you may be right." And then he'd tell me the things he couldn't accept. And I think that was the thing about him that made him stand out from the others. In other words, I think he was a perfectly normal boy for his age.

S: What were the kinds of questions that he wanted answered?

Ethel: Well, it would be hard to go back and state a specific one. But mysteries of faith that were a problem to him. He couldn't understand, and sometimes he'd say to me, "Oh, how do you know there is a God, and how do you know that Mary was a virgin?" That was one thing that bothered him. And one of the last times he was here he said, "I've accepted everything, but I can't accept the Immaculate Conception." And I said, "Well, you've gone a long way, Jon, and the day will come and you will." And then I never talked to him again about it, but I gathered from the paper that was read at the service that he had found the truth that he was looking for.

S: How about the other things? Now, what can you just tell me about Jon?

Ethel: Well, he would come to the door, and I'd answer the door, and there would be Jon with a big smile. And he used to bow way down because...it was me, and it was sort of a little game

it was sort of a little game we played. Sometimes he would come in and if Martha was here, he would kiss Martha. She was very fond of him because he was perhaps one of the first older boys she had ever known. And he was always very nice to her. He was just a nice boy to have. We had so many come here that I can't single him out too much except that he was disciplined as far as his thinking went. You always had a feeling that when you talked with him he was deep in thought, even if he made light of things, you knew that he wasn't making light of things.

I could tell you about the day, well, he was pretty young and he came down and he and Gene went out to play, and I think it was in March. And, if I remember right, didn't he have a little trouble with asthma. He had allergies the same as you did. We have a nursing home over here now, but at that time we had an estate and beautiful great big pine trees that any boy would love to climb. So, they went over and climbed the trees. And, as they went out, I said, "Now be careful because that field is flooded." And, within a few minutes, you (Gene) were back, Jonny had fallen out of the tree and was drenched. And I took all his clothes off and put him to bed and dried his clothes and fixed him up and sent him home. That was just one thing that happened. Those are the kinds of things that happened when children come to your home. We had quite a few.....

I don't know that I can think of anything else. He was wonderful. He always came to see us when he came home holidays. He never forgot that this was a place he used to come a lot. And sometimes Gene would be here, and other times he wouldn't be. You could expect him at odd hours. That was one thing...It might be 10:30 or 11:00 at night, or it might be just before breakfast. You never just did know when Jon...

S: Miss Raymond said he transcended time--clock time.

Ethel: I think that was right.

2: Central Square going to a sunrise service with a girl--I guess she wasn't the organist, but she was going to sing? And the girl was late, and he was hurrying...5:00 in the morning, and the police stopped him.

S: Did he get a ticket.

2: Yes.

3: I told him that. I'm sure he got a ticket.

Ethel: I remember something else he said to me once. I have never forgotten it. Perhaps he must have said it to other people. When he went to VMI, I said, "Jon, why on earth, if you wanted to go to prep school, did you chose that one?"..Oh, that was college. "Well,"he said, "I've never been able to discipline myself, and that's why I chose it. I wanted to go down there so that I could attain self-discipline. I've never been able to." And I think hemust have down there, because I'm sure that he encountered many unpleasant things because he was from the North.

S: You encounter plenty of tough things whether you are from the North or from the South down there. It's just a tough institution. It really is. I'm going to ask your folks some of the same questions I asked you. I hope you'll bear with the same questions. Were you surprised when he went to Selma?

Ethel: Well, I had talked with him. He had thought about going down there when he was home sometime in the Spring. And I said, "Jon, why do you want to go?" And he said, "Well, I have to go and see for myself what's going on down there." And, of course, he did go. Then he came back...from Selma.

S: Did you have a chance to talk to him before he went back this summer?

Ethel: No.

Sally: The Felch's were away. Jon met us here. We had some house guests for the weekend and we had hotdogs and...I don't know where you people were. You must have been in New Hampshire then.

2: And then Jon and his mother came over to Brattleboro, didn't they?

Sally: No, Jon and his mother came to Brattleboro at Christmastime. The visit with Connie was before he went to Selma. And it seems to me we saw Jon twice while--you saw him, of course, in Cambridge. And it seems that I saw him twice. Did he come to Brattleboro as well as here?

2: No, he didn't. I remember he came here that night. We had the cookout. And then we saw him up at his house one day and we didn't stay very long. And he was writing the paper. As a matter of fact, I remember the paper that was written at the funeral service--that was read at the funeral service--because when I visited him in Cambridge in May which wasn't more than a week or so before he came home, I remember they were going to tear his room apart. He felt very bad about it, and make two rooms of it--he had a nice room in Cambridge. I read the first two paragraphs of that paper then. And then he was working.

on it here in Keene...And so actually the only time I probably talked to him about Selma was the night down in Cambridge, and I know we didn't talk that much, when he was here for the cookout.

Sally: Well, Jon and.....were here and Jon did most of the talking....Jon our house guest. He was interested in what Jon was doing and we did talk about it some. Of course, I hadn't been on the Cambridge trip, and that was the first I had too much insight into what his feelings were about it.

S: Can you remember any of the things he said--your impressions of what he said?

Sally: Yes...Probably too bad I didn't know him and have more of these conversations. I have a little better memory than my husband. Yes, one of the points we were discussing at the time here in the house between his return from Selma from the first trip and his going back was the difference in the viewpoints of the generations. And I can remember discussing my own parents' views. And, of course, these are northern people who consider themselves integrationists. They have a home in Florida. My mother has colored help in Florida whom she is very fond of. And she has their children over at Christmastime and gives the children presents...But she is--they are--still her help. And we were discussing this sort of a view. We were discussing these southern whites at that time, and northern whites and particularly the changing of generations. And I can remember saying that there had been a hurricane in Florida a year ago. This was just about the time of our wedding, and my parents were very upset about Mary Alice because, of course,--their help--because she was in a tarpaper shack. And they weren't too worried about their own house which they knew was pretty well built. So they finally got in touch with her. She doesn't have a phone, and you have to call neighbors and this sort of thing. And they sent her a check and everything. And I said, "Now, do the southern whites feel this way?" And Jon said, "Yes, they do." He said they will--if the negroes are in need--they either don't have food, clothing or shelter--generally the white people will take care of them. However, they will not accept them as equals. We're all aware, of course, of the things which they won't do. But he did seem to feel that the white people felt a responsibility for the negroes. I don't like to compare it to the feeling that you have occasionally of taking care of a puppy dog or something, but something more on this order than taking care of your own children. I remember that part of the conversation.

2: Something else is on the edge of my mind that I can't quite remember.

Ethel: When did his interest start in this because, you know, living here in

Keene where there were perhaps maybe three negro families, the subject was never spoken of very much.

2: This is one of the things that we discussed that night. No, Jon and I maybe discussed it in Cambridge. But we did discuss it one of the last times that I saw him. Our attitude towards negroes as we grew up. And in Keene there were no negro families with the exception of two or three. There was one negro girl in my high school class. There are more negro families now. But, the only negro we knew was George Miller who is a very nice man, always speaks to you on the street. He always has a smile and says 'hello.' He more or less manages one of those local movie theatres, and would always call you by name when you went in. And everybody in town, I think, liked George Miller. He and his wife lived a very quiet life and were good people. They had a daughter who I believe--isn't she an opera singer?

Ethel: She's a vey talented organist and musician all the way through.

2: And went to one of the better music schools and is quite accomplished. But, on the other hand, George always--it seemed to Jon and I as we talked about it--we accepted George as someone who worked in the movie theater which wasn't one of the better positions in the town and wouldn't expect to see him other places, and there was no feeling for or against him. But he did stand out as a negro.

3: Well, I think that's rather typical whether you are red, white or black. I think the attitude towards help is the same whether red or white or black. People in Keene have had maids and chauffeurs in the old days. Nobody has them anymore, but it's the same thing. You didn't expect to see them at the Ritz bar.

2: But I think anytime we thought of a negro, we thought of George Miller.

Sally: And George Miller now Gene, is probably thirty-five or forty years older than you are and still calls you Mr. Felch.

3: George must be seventy years old.

Ethel: And you know it's a strange thing. Everyone wouldn't be in a position to know this. He's quite affluent, isn't he?

3: Yes. Well, the old major took care of George. I mean, George took care of the major.

Ethel: And, where someone might think of him as simply a man who is the ticket-taker or whatever you want at the theater, that's just on the surface.

Sally: I think in this conversation the way you and Jon and I were talking about it was the fact that George was liked in Keene and was accepted in Keene. Somewhat, and I'm sure unconsciously, people thought he kept his place. As I say, here he is forty years older than we are, and there's no reason in the world why he can't call Gene by his first name. But he calls him Mr. Felch, and he calls me Mrs. Felch. So, he's this kind of a person. And, for this reason, he's well-liked in Keene. Did you already tell Mr. Schneider about the conversation you and Jon had about how you would feel about hiring a negro?

2: Here's something you might be able to find out about. We talked quite a lot about negroes in Keene. Jon brought up the question about how would you feel if you were in a position of having a negro apply as a teller in the bank? I don't know how Dad would feel about it. And, I answered him quite honestly. If this man were poorly qualified and had a nice personality and everything you would look to in someone who would be representing you, normally I would feel that I should hire him. From a practical business point of view, I'd have a conflict between the two interests. Because I would be afraid that having a negro on the teller lines would alienate many customers. And this is one of the things we discussed. You wouldn't expect to see a negro as a bank teller. And I don't know whether we are right or wrong in making this judgement about Keene...but the conversation went along those lines.

3: There are times lately when I swapped some of the ones...

Ethel: Well, I think this is something that we will all adjust to in time... gradually and in time.

3: For instance, George, years ago we had a very nice hotel that was known over a wide area, and it was torn down in 1931. In the old days it was--everyone of name--stayed there and certain people lived there, and old Major King, who was a bachelor and a lawyer and quite an influential man stayed there and George always took care of him, and George after the hotel was down, the Major moved into an apartment in the bank block, and then George continued to care for him. One day at a director's meeting the Major pulled his watch out--he had one of these you wear in a vest pocket with a chain--he looked at it and it had evidently stopped. The Major's remark was, "Gosh, I guess George forgot to wind my watch." So, that's the way George took care of the Major.

Ethel: But it was through the Major that George began...

3: The Major took care of him. The property would come up that somebody had to foreclose, and the Major would say, "George, I think you ought to buy this," and gave him the money. And George now owns a lot of rental property in the town as a result of the old Major. And, of course, this was back in the Thirties and the early Forties that he was buying this stuff. It's probably worth ten times what he paid for it. But, as far as....you can go back to Gracie who was very well brought up and went to certain parties as a small child but as she got to the point--as she got older--things changed eventually. She went somewhere to college.

Felch IV: Sally, that same night Jon talked about the Johnsons.. Do you remember that? And there were some things he knew about the Johnsons. I don't remember what it was. They're the people who are negro, and they are very light. You may have heard of them. There was a movie done Lost Horizons about them.

Felch III: He wrote a book Lost Horizons, made into a movie.

FELCH IV: They lived as whites in this town for many years, and Jon knew about some things that had happened after that movie came out with respect to the medical profession and I don't remember what it was or it may have been the Ladies Auxillary at the Hospital or something there that Jon knew through his father and commented on it.

SALLY: I don't remember.

ETHEL: Well, there were little that occurred that weren't pleasant for the Johnsons, but now they are accepted and they are a wonderful couple. Mrs. Johnson does a great deal of civic work, and she's an expert at whatever she does. They are very happy here.

FELCH IV: Sally, do you remember the night, I think it was before we were married. Yes, it was. You were at summer school, and you and Jon and I sat in the bedroom until pretty late. It was a weekend and you stayed here. Do you remember that? Do you remember that conversation at all?

SALLY: Yes. We did discuss the Immaculate Conception and the virgin birth and religion in general.....but I can't remember too much that Jon said. My recollections of the conversation are something like this: we were discussing some

specifically doctrinal things. I can remember questioning Jon on some of the things that I didn't understand.

FELCH IV: I remember the conversation was largely between you and Jon.

SALLY. It concerned specifics; it concerned the discipline in the Catholic Church, the hierarchy, the one telling another one which, of course, is very difficult for--- I was raised a Presbyterian--for somebody of an--I don't know what to call it--a Non-Anglican, Protestant, origin to understand and to accept because you're not trained in this way of thinking, and Jon accepted it, and he tried to explain it to me. My feeling about it was that Jon, as you mentioned, was a person who thinks--or looked for discipline, admired it, and tried to acquire it and, so, therefore, this sort of thing appealed to him. Gene, do you know what caused Jon to change from the Congregational Church, which I would consider also one of these Non-Anglican, Protestant churches, to the episcopal faith.

.....

Sally: Well you know what your wedding day is like. Too many people around to notice something, anybody in particular. I was thinking that I could write the little girl's mother whom I knew very well and see if she knows of any particular qualities that Jon had or any particular interest that he showed which caused her to hold this reception for him rather than...a dozen or two dozen other people. I don't know what sort of things you are interested in for this book, but I'd sure be willing to drop her a note, and if anything comes back that is worth anything, send it along.....

S: Please do. I need everything at this point, actually.

FELCH IV: You asked...This is a letter written by Jon December 10, 1958, and goes on. And his letters are at this point--were--to me--didn't say a great deal, complained about VMI a lot. "Social life nonexistent, as usual. Spiritual less. Intellectual beginning to blossom." Well, I mentioned to you that there was a time when Jon seemed to go away before his Father's death from his original strong religious feelings, and this was one of those times, and in answer to Sally's question, I don't think I could add much to what I said this afternoon. He seemed to lose some faith from the early time when he thought of Christ--or probably not the earliest but along about his high school years when his thinking about Christ was that he was a great prophet, a great philosopher, great humanitarian and that type of thing. And when he began to think this way, his faith began to diminish, and then he re-examined all these issues and came back to

to the more traditional thinking, and that's why he made the change I think.

SALLY: Well, do you think it was partly....

FELCH IV: Yes, that, but also the history too. He felt that....Of course, I think one of the things that impressed Jon, one of the things that I remember we talked about a little bit was--just thinking of Christ as a man, he was a man who never wrote a book, never held public office, and who never led an army or did any of the things which men usually go down in history for, and working with twelve men built up the greatest religion the world has ever known and influenced history probably as much as anyone has. And, of course, this impressed Jon. And Jon was much more a scholar than I ever have been...or will be of church history. And I know he studied the problem of the people-- What do I want to say--

FELCH III: ...because I don't know how many times Mrs. Felch and I have had to say, "Well, look, it's 1:00 or 2:00, and I have to get up tomorrow morning and go out and face the world." And it would be here in the house during the winter time or it would be out in the garden in the summer or it would be--for awhile we had a cottage at a lake nearby and it would be out on the terrace there until the wee small hours. Three of you. Tony would be with you a lot, wouldn't he? And they'd sit out there with a can of beer apiece for three hours discussing all manner of things. I never...Has he met Tony?

S: Not yet, but I'm going to.

GENE FELCH IV: Quite often Jon would come in, and we'd start talking randomly. And there would be something that one of us had thought about or read or something and we'd get into a discussion on it. And I happened to come across this in a box with some letters today. Quite often--he'd of course read the Bible a great deal--and quite often he'd bring up something he'd read in the Bible...and this was one of them, and we had quite a long discussion about that passage from the Bible one night. And I was impressed with it and had a copy--just typed it up. I don't know, I guess it was when I was in college...desk. (Pause)

SALLY: Of course, you are aware of--sure of--in your very close relationship... between Jon and his mother. She came to State College with him for our wedding, and she came to Brattleboro the day that Jon went back to Selma the second time-- or for the summer. My mother was here, and of course she had met my mother at our wedding and Mother, of course, liked her very much...very charming person. So, Mrs. Felch and some other people from Keene and came for lunch, and Connie had just said 'goodbye' to Jon on his trip to Selma, and she was quite upset about it. And she seemed to have had intuitions or at least--Perhaps I shouldn't have made it sound so superstitious--she had, was at least aware of the dangers that he was under which I really wasn't. But she was quite...quite shaken by having to say 'goodbye' to him...question was in her mind...

ETHEL: Well, you think that Jon went back to help the colored people, the situation. I asked him why he was going, and he said, "Well, I want to go down there and see if I can't teach the white people down there to change their attitudes and to be more Christ-like in their treatment of the colored people." Well, do you think he was going down there too to be nearer to Christ himself, because I think that's why he kept moving from one church to another. He was always looking for closer communion than he had been able to get or to find.

S: Yes, I think all of that was involved.

ETHEL: And I think that went way back, and he must have been predestined to go to give his life.

S: Well, he certainly did give his life...He died saving another person's life. At that point he wasn't dying for Civil Rights as much as he was dying because another person's life was being threatened. I think Jon would have done this if he--no matter where he had been under any circumstances, if he'd seen somebody about to kill somebody else, I think he would have stepped in, you know. I...

S:

FELCH IV: You were asking about things we did in high school, and Jon was, as you know, a good musician, played the bass horn in our high school band and sang tenor in the acapella choir and...given solos, and loved music, especially classical.

ETHEL: And was quite an actor...Very good.

FELCH IV: Yea, and was a good actor too. And anyway, another person who might tell you some memories of Jon has come into my mind, and that would be Susan who now lives in--not Darien, Connecticut but but Danbury, Connecticut, I think. And her husband's name is John C. III, isn't it, Dad?

FELCH III: Yes, it isn't Danbury, is it? Darien sounds--I mean, it's easy enough to find it...father's down in Swampscott.

FELCH IV: Yes...But she was director of this children's theater which Jon was in for several years and was quite fond of Jon, although I'm afraid Jon and I caused her no end of mischevious problems. But, nevertheless, she might be a very good person to talk to. But, anyway, I was going through the papers today and I found Rotary Club news, May 10, 1956. And Jon and Carleton Russell and Gary H ward, who later married Carolyn Pierce, and myself had a barbershop quartet. We used to practice here Monday nights, and I think you and Dad used to go out shortly after we started rehearsing most of the time.

ETHEL: I recall it.

FELCH IV: And we had three or four numbers which we did: "Sweetheart of Sigma Chi," "Oh, Baby Mine," which was popular at that time, and there are a couple of others. At any rate, I was chairman of the entertainment program which the students put

on for the Rotary Club. They have what they call a Boys and Girls Weekend--Junior Rotarians around the town...chairman of the Board of Education...which was a riot. Anyway the only reason the quartet ever got to sing in public was the fact that I was chairman of that. Later on, we sang at a number of other events. Well, I'll read you the write-up from the thing on the quartet. It's the last thing that came on. "Gary Howard, Jon Daniels, Gene Felch and Carleton Russell wound up the program with a barbershop quartet giving their all to the "Girl of My Dreams," "Somebody Loves You" and "If I could Only Put My Arms around You," (Well, they left out here that we also sang "The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi.") "designed to be a serious effort, but they were all having so much fun that laughter sometimes hurt the harmony." Well, the thing that caused the laughter was that Jon was in the habit in rehearsal of singing in his top kind of voice to "The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi" the "blue of her eyes and the gold of her teeth." He did it in front of the Rotary Club, and that's when we no longer could contain ourselves.