

COLONEL DILLARD

V.M.I.

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.....he was going to continue to pray for me as long as he existed, anywhere whether he was dead or alive. So I feel I have somebody praying for me most of the time. After this it really hit me hard because I really didn't think of it again until after he had died. Now, I'd like to give you the address of Jonathan's roommate at V.M.I because he would know more about him in the early years than I would in some ways, I know more of the spiritual side of him and less of the factual. William Jackson Helms, III in the Class of '61; 333 Glen Avenue; Elmira, New York. They came down together and often rode together. They pooled transportation back and forth during the holiday time. Bill left V.M.I. in the middle, or towards the close of his second class year. He had virtually a nervous breakdown and I advised him to leave and go out and get a rest and come back, and he did. He came back and finished with very good records. I think that Bill's trouble sank pretty deeply into Jon's mind too. I remember my first conversation with Jon, of course, I've had several with him and another group. The whole group of image makers more or less made my office and my house their headquarters. I talked to them as a group first, but as soon as they began to talk (see page two of Colonel Dillard)

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individually, he told me of his plans to go into the ministry. So I put him down almost immediately as a future ministerial student and told him that surprisingly V.M.I. at one time was turning out more preachers than any other school in the state. Perhaps the boys feel the need for it more at V.M.I. than anywhere else. I would say in the middle of his second year, his third class year, he began to have some doubts about the ministry.

S. Why?

I don't know. His talks with other people, I think George Rote told me that he told you that he'd been talking to Joe Pierce who was the glee club director, who later on was to be a theological student himself, you know, he left here to go into the seminary. I don't know, ....perhaps his classes, perhaps it was just a time that all young men go through when they begin to wonder that those values that they've been accepting without much critical acumen all their lives are really the true values. In my opinion, it was the time when he had to search for the answers and found out that they were after all the true values in spite of his doubts for the second and third year. Then I found in my file this morning a letter which I had written to the Danforth Foundation. Jonathan had applied for a Danforth scholarship - this was in his first class year. As you know, you have to say that you're going to be a minister or teacher in order to get one of those awards. He applied and was given a grant, a very wonderful grant, then he also got a Woodrow Wilson and he decided that he would take the Woodrow Wilson grant instead of the Danforth. Since I pressed to hard to help him with the Danforth Foundation, especially hoping he would continue and go into the ministry, I then wrote a letter to the Danforth people explaining how Jonathan had wavered back and forth. He went to Harvard College with the idea of studying in English and I told my favorite professor up there, Douglas Busch, to look out for him. I think Harvard really made a cranny in the wall to take him because they were filled to the brim and they took him as a special student and this grieved me also because at the beginning of the term almost he decided he didn't want to go into English, but go to the seminary. I don't know exactly what happened to Jon in his first few months at Harvard, but there must have been much vexation of spirit about whether he had really done the right thing, and obviously, he hadn't because later on after he did change and go back to the seminary

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idea he was I think never after that sorry about it. But when he changed his mind and then changed it again and then I went to see him in Cambridge and found him not there and asked people at Harvard how he was doing and they said we don't know him and then I checked with the registrar and found he was no longer there, I was not angry, but terribly disturbed about it. I also wrote him a letter telling that I was coming to Harvard and I didn't get an answer and I thought maybe at first he didn't want to see me then I realized later that he probably hadn't received the letter.

When he did see me down here, the first thing he did was come in with his hand over his face and said, "You're going to kill me for not answering your letter", and so forth, but of course I understood. I don't know what took place in that first term in the fall of 1961 when he was at Harvard, but I'm sure it was a serious affair and a very decisive one too.

Now, the things I remember of Jonathan here are mostly the spirit rather than the facts. All cadets do the same thing, at least they wear the same shoes and the same haircut and it's only in the ways that they are individual that you remember them. Of course his way of being individual was the type of person he was. Very serious. He was a very good student, excellent writer. Though in the first year I think the crossness and the impersonality of the rat system hit him quite hard or what he thought was the crossness and impersonality of it. He came later on to understand what it had done for him. It helped to build him up quite a bit. He was I would say undeveloped and rather timid young man when he first came here, he needed some hardening. I told him this right away and he knew it. In his first year I think he flunked his chemistry, both terms, because there was something happened to him, he just couldn't do it. The next year he took it he made A's on it or made very good grades,....you'll have to check that. I asked him the following year why he hadn't done that damn thing the first year he said, I hadn't really put my hand to the plow and decide I had to do it. I think this hand to the plow idea was something that worked on him a great deal on lots of things, as to deciding when and to what he would dedicate himself. I remember a number of his themes, I remember that I would take them out and read them to the class because they were well written.

S. You don't have any copies of those?

I don't, I just looked through my theme saved file and I don't have any. I have some things at home, but my wife is my filer - she's in the hospital and I don't know



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where they would be. I found a copy of something he wrote. He sent this to me after he had stopped by home and you can see something about his writing in that.

S. Have you seen the paper he wrote that was read at his funeral?

No.

S. I must have a copy of that sent to you.

Please do, and send me anything else.

We had long talks about his business down in Selma. I was, I suppose, too maternal in attitude, I was concerned with his safety. And I said to him, "John you realize you may be shot, don't you?" He said, "Yes, I do." He said he felt that he was called to go down there and he also said at breakfast one morning, "I feel that I have been filled with the holy spirit just to do this job". I must be honest and say, "Now look, Jonathan, you can be one of the most brilliant ministers in the Anglican communion, and I feel that of course it's wonderful that you're filled with the holy spirit, but right now I feel that you ought to be filled with latin and greek and hebrew." He disagreed with me on that and, of course, I respected his opinion. But I was worried that he was taking too much time at this point to go away from his work and I hope the people at the seminary hear this, There were so many things that he needed and could fall back on later on as a really leading clergyman in the church and I wanted him to get it while he was at Harvard, the best place to get it. I was disturbed about his going to Alabama twice, for his personal safety and also because I was worried about his neglecting his work and possibly falling into a pattern like this chemistry business in the first year at V.M.I. I, of course, approved of what he was doing and I wondered about the wisdom of it at the time.

S. Were you surprised that John went down to Selma?

No.

S. Does this fit?

Oh, yes.

S. Were there any trends that you saw now that you look back that sort of developed and were leading to this?

No, nothing in detail I think.

S. Did Jon ever talk to you about death?

Yes, I mentioned the business about the intercession of the saints and the fact that he felt he might be killed.

S. How about in his themes, in the things that he wrote about. Did he ever concern himself with. On what levels did he write?

He was interested in what I call the pursuit of death. Appsycoloical term that concerns the romantic poets. John Keats and Shelley. I remember when he was very deeply interested in the romantic poets. Of course he was also interested in the existentialist, but mostly the theological and literary ones, which in a way, clusters about the idea of existence and death too. But I don't remember anything specific now that he might have said. I think he was consious of his role of playing roles. I remember that he said when he was valedictorian that this was a natural for me. And it's funny how you remember little things, I once quoted to him just as we were walking somewhere, some obscure lines from Shelley. my  
dead child met his own image walking in the garden. The idea struck him and he remembered the lines and quoted them to me in a letter once. I had forgotten long since that I had quoted them. He said, you remember the time that you said- that you gave me those lines. But I'd reflected that possibly Jonathan was aware of meeting an image of himself from time to time.

S. How did Jon stand up with his peers, in terms of immaturity or intellectual ability. Would you say he was a more mature person as a third classman, or second classman.

Intellectually and spiritually, vastly more mature. But in other ways less mature. Physically he was undeveloped, socially, though he had good sweet manners and all that I felt that at first he needed being pushed into a bunch of boys so's he could get to be more like them and they could get to know him better and it took some time before they did. I would say Jonathan was probably well into his Junior year.

I had a letter from one of his classmates who is also a very fine man saying that he came to admire him very greatly.

S. Did his class ever come to admire him?

They must have.

S. How did the selection of valedictorian come about?

This is a vote of confidence and respect.

S. Is this something that the leaders of the class say now we want the rest of you to elect this person?

No, it's entirely democratic vote, - showing of hands. They usually nominate seven or eight people with some discussion of them then they narrow that down to

about three.

S. Who are "they?"

The whole class. 280 some members. I don't know how many his particular class might have been. At a town meeting, sort of way- everybody's present then these names are narrowed down say from ten to three. Then they stop, go away and perhaps three nights later come and have the final vote. They generally choose a man whom they admire, who will give a good speech and will have some intelligence so that the speech will seem to come as a credit to the class and a man whom they can trust in saying something worth saying. Have you seen his speech?

S. Yes. I think it's a stunner.

Well, I thought so too. I'm the adviser for the valedictorian addresses every year and, of course, I worked with him but his phrases were his own and I thought it was by far the best one of the past seven or eight years. Several people after the commencement was over without knowing I'd had anything to do about advising told me by far that this was the best thing of the whole commencement. I thought it was too.

S. Did you say you weren't surprised that Jon went to Selma. Would you think that very many V.M.I. cadets would be so inclined.

Yes.

S. So, then John doesn't stand out particularly.

Well, he does, too. I would say that V.M.I. turns out a lot of young men who would be willing to die, if necessary, for things that they believe very strongly. The general difference I think here is that this particular thing is what he believed very strongly. The letter that I had from his classmate said he admired him very much for doing what he did though he would not have done the same thing himself. But this young man might well have done it for something else. I always expected him to act strongly in what he believed.

S. So, were there any incidents or events here at V.M.I. that kind of prefaced this kind of thing. Was Jon involved in helping any of the cadets?

Yes, he was quite active as an upperclassman helping other underclassmen.

S. Well you two must have talked together and must have shared some of the things that were on his mind. You describe some sort of an inner struggle going on.

He had difficulty defining his own limits. He felt at first as all people do a disparity between the christian ideal of service and love with the military ideal



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of obedience and strict adherence to rules and details and everything. I tried to point out to him and help him realize that this was four years of following a system so that you could get the most out of it without necessarily a formal commitment to a life of giving commands or receiving them. It took him some time to get the idea. V.M.I. doesn't try to turn out Napoleons. It doesn't even concentrate on soldiers, that's not its primary purpose.

Jonathan would have been torn between his sense of duty as a third classman and his knowledge of what human kindness and service should be. Third classmen are supposed to have nothing to do with the rats and supposed to be very stern towards them, things of this sort. He was young at the time and didn't perhaps have enough focus to realize that acting as third classman would not necessarily go against his christian beliefs.

S. Do you think this could have contributed to his doubts about going into the ministry?

Very possibly. I talked to him many times about this very thing. At one time in his rat year he thought of leaving, but he said he did not want to leave early because if he did he wanted to prove it wasn't because he couldn't shine his shoes and meet deadlines or any of the rest of it.

S. One of his classmates at E.T.S. said to me there was always one thing he remembered about Jon he always shined his shoes.

Well, that little thing hardly did rub off. He didn't always shine them here which is one reason for his not having the stripes. Some 150 odd cadets would have stripes, a very small number have stars, which are for academic distinction. It doesn't mean just getting good grades. Maybe two or three in his class would have stars, - they have stripes by the scores. So he felt the stars to be more important, of course I do too, being a teacher.

It might have been a disappointment to him at first when in June of his rat year when the order came for the next year he didn't get any military authority.

S. Did any family situation contribute any to his thoughts about the ministry?

Yes. However, his doubts about his philosophy of life in general. There were some troubles in his family. I never inquired into it. He never talked to me about it. Something about his sister.

S. Of course, the father's death. You were with him at that time, weren't you? How did you feel he responded?

Very well. I was concerned about him. I remember sending a wire, or flowers or something of that sort, then talking to him immediately after he came back and I remember talking to Mrs. Daniels, too.

S. Do you feel he was bitter that this had happened.

No, I didn't get that idea. You don't always know exactly what a cadet is thinking, of course, Bill. Very few students will give completely to any teacher. The military has nothing to do with that here. But, the fact that I am a teacher and he was a student.

I think he got a lot out of this class. He had a way of squeezing his teachers dry, getting the best that they had to offer. It was hard to teach that young man because he worked you so hard. You had to remember not to say the same thing twice. If you see a man every day for four years, that's hard to do.

He was a member of the Society in fact I believe he was president. He had a very keen mind, was interested in nearly all the fine arts and the humanities. I'm just wondering whether his course in philosophy did anything for him or to him. I've forgotten who the teacher might have been. I believe it was a boy named Williams, Bill Williams. I think he's teaching at William and Mary now.

You see how little I have of any definite. . . . .

S. Oh, no you've given me a lot. Since I got to know him so terribly well the last couple of years, a lot of it is establishing my own impressions and reactions. Several other people who knew him well responded in much the same way and rather helped to confirm. I'm finding one thing about Jon, he really didn't spend much time talking about the time of day. It was usually some idea he was trying to discuss, and frankly, when we would get together I would know I had to put aside so much time and that it was going to be intense discussion.

This is the very word I was about to use, he impressed me as being very intense. about things. Sometimes I was worried about it because a man who is so intense can sometimes drive himself until he breaks. I had a job with this young man taking things so seriously that he might crack. That's one reason I saw him so often when he was a rat. They tell you to do a thousand things the first few days and you try to do all thousand, you won't do any correctly. I tried to tell him to concentrate on essentials and expect to do some things wrong and expect to get caught. To keep a light touch. He was quite serious in his work. There would be times when he would question this



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whole intensity almost, I mean he was .....

Yes, I suppose that's inevitable too, for a man that intense. He was bound to question, or reach a certain point where he says, well, what am I doing.

S. But he was kind of conscious of himself.

S. If you were good friends for a year you must know something.

Cadet:

I was a rate

T. This is a good case in point - he did talk to underclassmen, tried to help them and guide them.

C. I sat beside him in church just about every Sunday. We had mutual friends, Bob Tyler, do you remember him?

T. Oh, yes. He went into the Peace Corps.

C. Yes, he did. And Jack McQuade, perhaps you remember him as well.

T. He was from New Hampshire, wasn't he?

C. I believe he was, N.H. or Vermont, I know John was from Keene, N. H. I know he gave a scathing valedictory address at his graduation.

T. I remember it quite well and there was hardly anything that you would call scathing in it.

C. It was critical and by V.M.I. standards it was pretty daring. John was very much an individualist, which was one of the things I admired about him.

S. I did want to ask you if Jon was having sexual concerns.

T. Yes, I thought he did at one time. He never said anything very deep with me. I thought I understood some things that he didn't want to talk about. He felt it might embarrass me or put me on the spot and I tried in my own indirect way it didn't make a damn bit of difference to me and it was something that shouldn't worry him, or break his heart about anything like that. Did he discuss these things with you?

S. A little bit, yes.

T. I am sorry that he didn't feel willing to discuss it with me more, but I'm sure he felt that the uniform and position here and so forth would prohibit it. I tried to tell him that I was also sorry that he felt he didn't want to destroy my regard for him, and I told him many times that I had thousands of secrets and they hadn't broken my back yet. There was hardly anything that I could conceive of that hadn't been told me by some cadet at one time or another. He never responded to the invitation, so I didn't press it.

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I have opinions about that myself, that's one of the things that made me worry about him as a cadet here, and one of the things that perhaps prayed on his mind too. It may have had something to do with his feeling worthy of the call to the ministry.

S. I think that's true, I just wondered how because  
it was something that was present for some time.

T. When I found out that Jonathan was not going to discuss this thing and wasn't ready to do it, I tried to make doubly sure that it wouldn't come in between us and it didn't. He still came to me and spoke very freely. But I understood that this was an area that I was not to enter and I didn't.

S. Do you think it was a real thing, or was this a fantasy thing.

T. Somehow I don't feel that it was either one. I think Jonathan was disturbed by the fact that very strong love of any kind for man, woman, a flower, a star - anything grips the whole body and loving like this was disturbing to him because he thought he'd invaded realms that were improper. I truly feel that's the way he felt about it. People have asked me would Jonathan Daniel actually have kissed a colored girl? You know, this was brought up in the trial. And I said yes, he might, because this is how far his love was extended. It was love and all the whole apparatus of love. It wasn't just a feeling of kindness or affection for these negro girls, it was love. I think he extended this into everything he loved and it embarrassed him on occasions

S. Yes, I think it was a real conflict for him.

T. Now, these are confidential remarks. I was of course pleased that he would come to me and give me some intimation of the things that were troubling him and for that reason I've never spoken of them to anybody, not my wife, or anybody else.

I would say that doubt about one's sexuality among teenagers or people in their early twenties is very commonplace. I get it scores of times or intimations of it every year from cadets. You begin to wonder if the sadism of the rat system may not be sexually connected or, rather relevant.....things of that sort, you know.

S. Yes, I think that many people were attracted to Jon and that made a problem for him too. Men and women. I think he was approached by people many times.

T. That was probably because of his intensity of manner, don't you think?

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T. He never told me about any incidents, we never got that far.

S. Regarding Joh, I don't think there was any intimate physical involvement.

T. I would agree with that. I may approach the question in the wrong way, but a wildness was going on in his mind. It wasn't that he was having sexual relationships in the usual terms that people talk about, either going to bed with a girl or having homosexual relationships, neither of which I think he did. He wasn't in those terms. This always posed a conflict. You talk about me, my image of me and the way other people see me. Which of these am I's am I a part of.

T. I remember he wrote me once, this was on a post card. He said I feel so much better now I think that I've lost myself. Himself had become involved in something bigger than himself.

S. He wrote me this very long letter I wish I had brought it with me, I haven't shown it to anybody because I want Mrs. Daniels to see it. I'm not even sure that I will publish it. It's a wonderful letter and very personal letter. He talked about the tension again.

We had a long conversation one night before the accident, he talked about death. Our symbols became Jerusalem and Rome. Jon was very careful not to confuse the way of the disciples and the way of Christ. Rome - the road of the disciples, at the end of that road was Paul's crucifixion. It's like having one of Von Harper's letters where he just begins to open up a theological idea, and this is what Jon is doing in this and you just wish you had ten more follow ups to develop it through, but of course time didn't allow for it.

T. That's one of the real griefs in my job. I get so many letters and I cannot sit down and write letters that are adequate answers to let epistle No. 2 and epistle No. 3 follow, I have to answer mine with post cards.

S. You don't have any letters from him do you?

T. I would have to look, I don't know where they would be. I had a lovely post card from him at Easter from Selma, but it was simply the joy of Easter.

S. If you do happen to come across any of these and you are willing to share them, as I say there will be nothing printed at least without the approval of Mrs. Daniels.

T. Jonathan said to me several times he felt disturbed because he felt different than other people, getting back to your question a moment ago.

S. He didn't seem to change at the seminary either. If he felt different there he felt different here.



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T. I tried to tell him that any dedicated person felt different also. If you've given your life to one thing you are going to be different from others that are just scurrying through and taking life casually. I tried to take the burden of this difference away and try to make it into something that would make him more proud of himself.

S. I think Jon was terribly strained, more so than at any other time when he went back to Selma the second time.