

The Junior Year Lottery

By Phil Yeagle

It was Monday, December 1, 1969. I was 20. Close friends gathered in Mohn around a small b/w TV. It was the first draft lottery of the Vietnam War. My number was 37. That night, a blackness seemed to occlude my future.

I had come to St. Olaf in 1967 with limited views on the big questions of the day, a product of a quiet, mono-cultural town in northern Illinois. St. Olaf opened my eyes to different understandings of the world. It was my sophomore year roommate who catalyzed my awakening on the war through late-night discussions in Ellingson. He helped me build my confidence that the pro-war attitudes of my hometown did not have to prescribe my views.

Now in my junior year, I was unwillingly in a lottery that shadowed the remainder of my St. Olaf experience. The complicated feelings were unresolved for a long time. I was frightened, and I wanted personal release from the draft even while protesting the war on moral grounds.

At graduation in 1971, schoolwork ended better than I had expected. I got into grad school at Duke. Close friends got married. And then, there was the pre-induction physical.

I did not go to war. I got a letter in July of 1971, about a month after graduation, saying I had a medical deferment. While I strongly opposed the war and was intensely relieved by my release from that fate, my joy tempered over time as a kind of survivor's guilt grew. That guilt was exacerbated by the scorn tragically inflicted on those who did serve, willingly or unwillingly. I wish our entire country had not had to suffer such deep and enduring pain.

The liberal arts curriculum of St. Olaf provided tools to inspire and empower me as an emerging adult to address the world. However, when I was almost overwhelmed by the tides that washed over during junior and senior years, it was the spiritual side of the college, manifest through Ole friends, Christmas Fest and even occasionally chapel, that helped the most.