

From Kirk Wetters, now at Yale University

DECEMBER 30, 2013

I'm pretty sure I first met Gabe at the beginning of seventh grade – or was it eighth? I think maybe it was eighth, because I recall perceiving him as a “new kid”; I picture myself meeting him for the first time before the first meeting of Bob Bacon's American History class – or was it before Bacon's “Logic” class? But that can't be, because I think that was a ninth grade class, and the room I'm picturing was in the ninth grade building? At any rate, I don't think it could have been seventh grade because everyone was new then. But maybe he moved from Pathfinder to the Traverse City Area Public Schools already in seventh grade and I only didn't meet him until the second term or until eighth grade? It seems that several memories may be blended together.

Junior high is a total blur... I don't go back there very often in my mind, and there's nobody around to reminisce with and keep those memories alive. What else to say about it? In some ways it feels like I knew Gabe already earlier. I guess this is because he's the only friend who I kept in regular contact with after high school, so I project his presence back into even earlier times of my life.

So, junior high: I know that we (together with Dave Unger) spent a lot of time at Gabe's house, because Gabe was the only one in our immediate circle of friends who lived within walking distance of the junior high. I think we sometimes did homework there, but more often gossiped, hung out, watched TV, played video games on Gabe's computer. I especially remember Tetris, but there may have also been text adventure games and other kinds of games.

Damn, my memory is bad. What else was going on in those days? I can remember the ‘student revolts’ against “Suzie” Williams, the English teacher whom we couldn't stand, which was a great source of solidarity and creativity (e.g. the “Christmas tree incident,” which definitely happened in ninth grade). Dave and Gabe and I would hang out a lot in those days (eighth and ninth grade?). I can remember eating lunches on the manmade rise of grass behind the junior high and getting picked on by assholes; for whatever reason, Gabe was more immune to bullying than the rest of us. He had a rather unique way of dealing with this kind of thing, or deflecting or avoiding it, but I don't know anymore what it was (if I ever knew).

I'm guessing that the outdoor lunches on the hill behind the school must have been seventh or eighth grade – because in ninth grade we mostly ate in Mr. Fouch's room and used his computer. And Bart made prank calls from the phone – pre-caller ID. But, on the lunch hill I also remember using fragmentary German as a kind of a code language, so maybe this was actually ninth grade (when Gabe and I were in German class together). Or maybe it's just because Gabe and Dave knew a few words of German from studying it at Pathfinder?

Small piece of trivia: Gabe was known at this time for his imitation of the Dana Carvey-SNL character, the Church Lady, especially the particular facial expression that she made whenever she asked “isn't that special?” I guess Gabe must have used this expression every time anyone said anything sordid or off-color – a pretty frequent occurrence.

Another random recollection: It must have been ninth grade when Dave shaved his head? Or maybe it was high school already? I can remember that neither Gabe nor I was especially approving of Dave's more rebellious ideas, though I'm pretty sure that I was always up for a thorough discussion of such topics (also political topics) whereas Gabe would typically say less and what he did say was more discreet.

In ninth grade my mom was the coach of our “Odyssey of the Mind” (OM) team. I don't have a lot of strong memories about it that except very general ones on the order of “what a nightmare” (not least of all for my mom). But certainly a lot of time was spent in this way, especially on Saturdays. I think most of the team was more interested in being jackasses than in brainstorming and creating or going on odysseys or whatever. Still, we thought we were clever and creative etc – I think our mousetrap contraption had something to do with Diogenes, and Robert Bork's beard... Maybe the concept was amusing, who knows? But perhaps it wasn't even ninth grade, and maybe Gabe wasn't even involved? I can't really remember, and the years blur together...

I can remember cross-country skiing with Gabe and his dad on the State Hospital grounds. And trying to gain access to abandoned buildings with Dave and Gabe after school... I guess that's the kind of thing that one is supposed to do at that age, looking for some form of lame excitement. Walking abandoned railroad tracks in Leelanau county was another one like that. If I did that kind of thing today, I'd worry about getting shot.

Academically Gabe was one of the best students in the grade, if not the best. Officially he was the best, the valedictorian. I had forgotten that too until recently. We were kind of competitive, as I guess everyone was in one way or another (even in the various ways of trying to opt out), but I remember it overall as a productive and good spirited kind of competitiveness. Gabe was never one to gloat or overestimate these kinds of things, whereas, looking back on it, I probably was. So hopefully I learned something from him about that. I can remember being happy when I understood some aspect of math that Gabe hadn't been able to quite grasp yet; then I would have the opportunity to explain it to him. But this didn't happen often. Overall I don't think school was too difficult for me or for Gabe or for a good number of the people we would hang out with. One isn't supposed to say things like that, of course, according to the US mentality of obligatory indifference and studied underachievement. But even for people we knew who didn't excel in school, I don't think it was because school was difficult: It was more a case of 'opting out' combined with the fact that the many didn't find school work challenging or engaging or valuable in the first place. I find that easy to understand. And from a certain point of view the whole thing can be perceived as a totally arbitrary competitiveness.

There's no doubt that Gabe was brilliant, but he didn't put much obvious stock in the narrow and petty forms of "brilliance" or "excellence." He was one of very few students in our high school graduating class (of around 700) who went to college out of state, and, I think, one of only two who went to an Ivy League institution. But those are just the credentials. As far back as I can remember, Gabe was intellectually interested in things for their own sake, and not because of what kinds of the benefits or advantages or necessities associated with these pursuits. Whether it was plants, books, music (which I'll get to later on), the kinds of things that others pursue as hobbies or entertainment, Gabe always approached it with seriousness and at a high level. I'm not sure to what extent I had ever encountered this particular form of intellectual focus at the time. It's not very common in any case, but I didn't realize that then. I'd like to think that I absorbed some of this approach from Gabe or that we mutually encouraged this kind of an outlook.

Some specific instances: I can't remember exactly anymore what kinds of stuff we were reading back then, but I'm pretty sure that Dave and Gabe and I were consuming a pretty wide variety of fantasy and science fiction novels. (What were they exactly? The "Thomas Covenant" books, classics by people like Isaac Asimov, "Xanth," probably still Doctor Who sometimes, L. Ron Hubbard's "Mission Earth", all manner of Tolkien-imitations; Douglas Adams, Terry Pratchett before he was well known.) The junior high had a "silent reading period," so in junior high there was always quite a lot of book-discussion and recommendations as background chatter. The short list I just managed to dredge up is only a sampling from a much larger pool. I have very little recollection of exactly what else we were reading. I think we considered ourselves sophisticated (or at least wanted to be sophisticated) in our selections. There was one book in particular though, which was a big deal for me at the time and which I know Gabe also read and which somehow shaped or played into our experience of junior high: Mervyn Peake's Gormenghast trilogy. It was probably my own first experience with something that seemed to me more like an ideal of "real literature" (as opposed to the more contemporary and pulpy sf/fantasy stuff, on the one hand, and the 'English class' books on the other). The style is very elaborate and gothic, as I think about it now, I suspect that Peake's novels were compelling for adolescent suspicions about the corruption of the adult world. Previous generations of readers probably found these suspicions expressed in works like *Treasure Island* (Peake was much inspired by Stevenson...), and kids these days find it things like Harry Potter and *The Hunger Games*.

This was a digression, perhaps, but hopefully it helps to give you at least a small sense of what life revolved around back then. The Gormenghast novels were probably the first book I ever read that led me to think about history not as a classroom subject but in terms of the weight of a world that had developed its

particular forms and deformations over hundreds of generation in order to arrive in the present as a suffocating and arbitrary tradition. I'm not sure that Gabe took these kinds of ideas to heart in the same way that I did, but I can remember with clarity that the characters of the novel were very much alive in our imaginations. I believe that we were the only ones in our friend-group to read these books (maybe Ryan read them, but only later)...

The topic of music is even more profound for me. I could probably (and maybe should) write a much longer reflection on CDs, concerts, conversations and experiences related to music over the almost thirty years I knew Gabe. But for now I'll try to boil it down to the highlights and essentials: I had started playing cello in (I think) fifth grade, and in junior high I played in the orchestra; during this period I started listening voraciously to the Interlochen Arts Academy radio station. I learned the names of orchestras, conductors, etc, which all seemed very far-off and exotic from the perspective of Traverse City, Michigan. Particularly influential for me at the time was a radio program called "The Record Shelf," hosted by Jim Svejda.<sup>1</sup>

Anyway, this is just background for the main point: I think that Gabe is probably the first (and maybe the only) person whom I ever introduced to classical music. Maybe in the record store context I managed to 'convert' a few others in small ways, but that's different. Most people I knew in those days (including most kids in the orchestra) just thought it was freakish to be so interested in classical music. So in that sense it was probably important for me to get at least one other person on board with it, otherwise there wouldn't have been anyone to affirm the activity in a general way or to communicate with about it. The irony from a certain perspective is that my own life has shifted away from music (except as a listener and occasional concertgoer), whereas Gabe started playing the piano as an adult – not an easy thing to do, or to decide to do, but, as I said above, Gabe wasn't necessarily interested in whether he would have 'great success' as a pianist or whatever. I think he did it to understand and enjoy music better. He was also really really good at diversifying his life in ways that made time for a lot of different kinds of stuff and people – for example also athletically, in tennis and running. Compared to most people I have ever known (and very much unlike me), he wasn't a time waster, not as far as I know, so I guess that must have allowed him to pursue a lot of different kinds of things in a way that was still focused.

Returning to the music-topic: We traded and exchanged CDs a lot back then. Also the Traverse City Public Library had a very good stock of classical CDs. Basically centuries of music just waiting to be discovered. I know that a lot of my most serious collecting didn't start until college: For example I can remember that I bought my first recordings of the Mozart and Strauss operas in Ann Arbor. What stands out in my memories of listening to music with Gabe in junior high and high school is Mahler, especially the Mahler recordings of Jascha Horenstein; I can remember reading and discussing reviews from the magazine "Fanfare"; I remember mail-ordering for the first time from the Berkshire Record Outlet (BRO) in Lee, MA, because they were the only source for Horenstein's recording of Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*. I think we ordered BRO semi-regularly after that and put together the orders collaboratively. A random sampling of stuff I can remember listening to in those days: Orff's *Carmina Burana* (in the Previn-EMI version), Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (with Jan de Gaetani) – and Schoenberg's *Gurre-Lieder* (in the Ozawa version), which I played into the ground – Wagner's *Ring* (in the Solti version, which I bought in Austria in the summer in high school), Schubert's *Winterreise* (especially with Hermann Prey) and other *Lieder* (especially with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Gerard Souzay); Bizet's *Carmen* (with Reiner) and orchestral music (conducted by Beecham); Fritz Reiner's Chicago Symphony recordings.. I can remember my taste and interests changing rapidly in those days, and discussions with Gabe were a constant part of that. I can remember getting Fischer-Dieskau's complete Schubert recordings on DG in the second year of college and telephoning with Gabe to let him know how worthwhile even the most early and obscure Schubert songs seemed to me. On the topic of Schubert, I can also remember conversations about the relative virtues of the great baritones (going back to Hüsch), and debates about Fritz Wunderlich, whom I found oversweet and somehow inexpressive. There were similar conversations about the great sopranos

---

<sup>1</sup> Though I listened to Svejda and read his book quite religiously up through the end of high school, working at the record store in college (SKR Classical in Ann Arbor) broke me out of the dependence on Svejda's dogmatic recommendations. According to Wikipedia, it looks like Svejda is still alive, and the show is even still on the air?

(Callas, Schwarzkopf) and altos and mezzos (Ferrier, Baker, Ludwig). And pianists, people like Schnabel, Richter and Kempff; conductors like Furtwängler (especially Furtwängler) and Klemperer.

These are pretty much random examples although also decisive ones. I can't put these examples in order very well, except in the cases when I can remember when and where I first bought a particular work or recording. After high school the dialogues about music continued, in letters, phone conversations and eventually in emails and over facebook: a stream of concert-reports and CD-recommendations; I can remember writing to Gabe a lot about concerts the year I lived in Frankfurt am Main (2000-2001). Pretty much anytime we saw each other we would listen to and discuss the latest CD enthusiasms late into the night. When I visited Gabe in Hamburg, Germany, when we were both in college – must have been Winter 1994? – we saw Carlos Kleiber conduct Strauss' *Rosenkavalier* at the State Opera in Vienna. We also saw Strauss' *Die Frau ohne Schatten* in Paris under Dohnányi. That was the beginning of the serious Strauss-affliction... I can also remember CD-shopping with him around Hamburg, Stockholm, Vienna, Paris. It was a big treasure-hunt to come up with the most interesting and unusual items. Seems like we also saw a concert in Stockholm – a Bartók piano concerto maybe? I guess it was during the same trip (weird to think!) when we tried to get tickets in Berlin for a sold out performance of Mahler's eighth symphony conducted by Claudio Abbado. The weather was many degrees below freezing and very windy for the whole trip, my first visit to Berlin. Gabe managed to find somebody selling an extra ticket, but I was not so lucky. Bummer for me. My state of mind during that whole trip was rather erratic (that's a different story), but this was definitely a low point. Maybe I'm fictionalizing, but I think I went to a poorly lit Turkish "Imbiss" for food and shots of cheap booze.

When Gabe and I lived in New York, we went regularly to concerts and to the Metropolitan opera. I should probably try to make a list of everything we saw, but I won't worry about that for now and just mention a few things that I can remember: LA Philharmonic under Salonen (Mahler 3 and, separate concert, Britten's Serenade), Janacek's "Makropoulos Case," Strauss' "Capriccio," Gluck's "Orpheus" at the City Opera, Handel's "Giulio Cesare," Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, Berg's "Wozzeck," Sinopoli conducting the Staatskapelle Dresden, Wagner's "Lohengrin" in Robert Wilson's staging, Pfitzner's "Palestrina," Monteverdi's "Orfeo" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Colin Davis conducting Frank Martin and Mahler's "Wunderhorn" songs (with Thomas Quasthoff). I can't be 100% sure at this point which of these concerts I saw with Gabe; we went to many more than are listed here. The question is: Whom else would I have gone with? Certainly, in the first year in New York (before Gabe moved there) I may have gotten some standing room tickets on my own; and there were other friends and girlfriends with whom I went to some shows now and then (Mike Wilson, Jasper, Idil, Tiffany, Ardashir). But Gabe and I regularly went to concerts and it was no big thing, which is partly why my memory is so dim in this case. Not all of the concerts we went to were necessarily super-great: Gabe got such cheap tickets through his job at Mount Sinai Medical Center that we didn't have to worry too much about whether the performers and performances were completely optimal (in our estimation).

After the New York era, we planned to see a lot more concerts than we actually made it to. I feel badly about that. Still, we did make it to Strauss' *Frau ohne Schatten* in New York and Monteverdi's "L'Incoronazione di Poppea" in the Berkshires (through the Boston Early Music Festival). And in June of this year, on the occasion of Gabe's fortieth birthday, we went to Charpentier's *Orphée* in Boston (again BEMF).

I miss Gabe when I listen to or think about music. Basically, he and I "discovered music" together in a more or less spontaneous and self-motivated way, and now when I think about music, it's often in the context of something I once said to Gabe or something I want to tell him about. It's weird that he's gone, because he's still a part of my internal dialogue about music.

I realize that I have screwed up the chronology and mostly skipped over high school – and skipped around after that. That's partly because junior high and high school are all blurred together anyway, and perhaps also because Gabe and I were somewhat less close in high school. New friends, other dynamics, different kinds of social groupings, growing up, whatever else. At the same time, we definitely still saw quite a bit of each other, in my dad's classroom before school, on the debate team, debate trips etc. But none of that seems terribly important to me in retrospect. I bailed on debate before my senior year, and I think that the

old friends from junior high were variously striving for new forms of self-definition and models of emulation that they hoped would lead them into some kind of adulthood. Typical high school, I guess. But when I look back on it, there wasn't really anyone I was close to at that time – I was more or less experimenting with different forms of friendship. But certainly no one closer than Gabe.

This leads me to a different topic: Gabe came out to me in the summer after our freshman year of college. At the time it was a bit of a shocker to me. In high school it seemed that sex was a semi-continual topic, but rarely if ever in a serious way, and certainly nobody wanted to talk about “emotions” in those days. That’s a phenomenon of later youth, I guess, assuming it’s a thing at all. And when they tried to talk seriously about such matters, it didn’t necessarily go well. Figuring this stuff out, to the extent that it can be figured out, is one of the big challenges of pre-adulthood, but for better or for worse most people I knew back then seemed to be working it out on their own. Probably that’s ultimately the only way to figure it, but one side-effect of lack of communication seems to have been that everyone tended to assume that everyone else was going through essentially the same thing they were. From an adult perspective one knows that that’s not necessarily the case. Anyway, I don’t want to continue to write stupid and cliché stuff about this, i.e. “after Gabe came out it strengthened our friendship” or whatever. But in some sense it probably did. It was also tough for me for a while though, in the sense of: ‘this is not the same person I thought I knew.’ As I see it now, big life-changes pretty much always strike close friends and family like that... but I didn’t know that at the time. It definitely created a kind of distance between us, which was not necessarily a negative thing overall. There were parts of Gabe and his life and his interests and passions that were completely different from me and mine, and once I accepted that, I think it probably reduced or eliminated any remaining competitive tendencies (on my part) or potential to compare or get involved with mimetic rivalries or whatever. Gabe was different enough from my own understanding of myself and he was (always and in any case) non-judgmental in ways that made it possible for me to communicate with him about essentially anything. That’s not to say that we confided in each other in a regular, extended or systematic or always “deep” way – but whenever it came to “catching up” and talking about “how things are going,” Gabe was one of the relatively small number of people with whom this was always an easy, productive and (so to speak) in no way “risky” conversation. As everybody knows, Gabe was a good listener, so, for better or worse, I think that I overall ended up using him more as a mirror for my own self-development, whereas he kept more inside. I don’t have that much idea what my friendship may have meant to him over the years. I don’t mean this in a critical or self-critical or overly generalized way; it’s just how I think it was. In particular, Gabe communicated somewhat less about his relationships and life-goals after he moved to Boston. That’s probably a result of the fact that we were both doing relatively okay with the “life goals” and were both in stable committed relationships. These factors imply that there was either less to say about “how things are going” and/or that one tends to hold things in more under these circumstances.

There would be a lot more to write – for example about Istanbul and Idil – especially if I had the time to wait for all of the memory-triggers and to write down all of the specific memories in all of the detail I can muster. But hopefully the present text – written in one sitting – at least gives an overview of what can be dredged up. It’s crazy to think that he’s gone.