

50 Years ago: May 4,1970 ~ May 4, 2020

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Christine Ann West

Fifty years ago today I was a junior at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, a “sister” institution to Kent State University. Below I recount my experience during that time.

My background

I had transferred to Miami the previous fall from Towson State College in Maryland. I was not happy at Towson because the school had recently converted from being a teachers’ college. I discovered that I did not want to be a teacher and I was annoyed that most instructors assumed that we were going to be teachers. Also, I lived in a horrible overflow housing situation. Being a Baby Boomer, we learned that regardless of what we wanted to do, 76 million American kids wanted to do the same thing; thus overcrowded colleges and dorms were typical experiences for Boomers.

I was a nice girl from Annapolis raised in a wholesome Christian upper-middle class family. My older brother had joined the US Marines about 5 or 6 months earlier. The week I left for college was the same week my brother left for Vietnam. Sometime that same month my mother returned to nursing after a hiatus of raising 3 kids.

Protests and Toilet Flushing

I refused to watch the news during my college years because the daily reports coming for Vietnam were too distressing. In fact, I seldom watched TV at all, as TVs were forbidden in dorm rooms and not easily accessible. But I knew enough to know about the war, the protests, and the draft lotteries because such topics were constant and one could feel them in the air. When Miami had our own protests and our ROTC building takeover, I stayed inside and did not participate. I was raised to honor and respect those in authority such as teachers, police, government leaders, and military organizations so I felt very conflicted about protesting. I was aware of, but did not participate in the flushing protest where all protesters were supposed to flush their toilets constantly and at an appointed time. I remember girls in the dorm doing it but I don’t recall the outcome. I think the dorm toilets were out of commission for a day or so. I remember the university president’s office being taken over as well as several other classroom buildings. I remember smoke bombs going off in the psychology building and a male psychology professor hysterically begging protesters to stop because the smoke would kill his rats and ruin his long-term research grant.

Aftermath of the Shootings and Subsequent Curfew and Shutdown

The day following the Kent State Massacre we were told that Miami’s classes were cancelled for the day. As on many days I saw my boyfriend at breakfast because our dorms shared the same cafeteria. It was a beautiful spring day and we decided to go for a hike and spend the day outside. My boyfriend was an art major and had to sketch a portfolio of themed pictures, so we hiked to a cemetery outside of town and he sketched while I studied. We took something to eat

and hiked back in time for dinner. While walking through the campus we saw a lot of cars with students loading their belonging. We commented to each other about the number of students that go home on weekends. It was something we did not do because I was from out of state, and he was on the track team and practiced or went to track meets on weekends. We barely made it to the cafeteria in time for dinner only to learn that the campus was shutting down and we had to vacate the dorms immediately because the town had imposed a curfew for 8:00 that night. We were stunned! And there was no information on how long the shut down and night-time curfews would last!

After much racing around (remember, no cell phones, emails, texts or even phones in our dorm rooms) my boyfriend finally contacted some of his track team buddies who shared an apartment off campus. Someone agreed that we could stay there so we each grabbed some supplies from our dorm rooms and headed to the apartment. Two of the guys were still there and the rest had gone home. My boyfriend and I slept on blankets on the living room floor. The next day one of the guys left, and that night we were on the living room floor again, with one guy in his bedroom. The next day that guy went home. My boyfriend and I were alone in the apartment for two days before he, too, got a ride to his home in Dayton. Sometime during those two nights, we both lost our virginity. I would turn 21 later that month.

Delivering a Baby?

On my first day alone, I walked to town for some groceries. Upon returning, I came across a college-age boy grilling something outside the apartment building on a hibachi. He was very forward, trying to get me to join him, and I felt threatened. I went back to my apartment, locked the door and stayed inside. I had never been alone in an apartment before and found it very surreal to be in the home of people I didn't even know. I was jumpy and played comforting music quietly in the living room while I tried to sleep in a stranger's bed.

Sometime during the night I was awakened by loud frantic banging on my door. What was going on?! Was grill-boy drunk and coming after me? Was my stereo too loud? Did someone follow me home? I called out "Who's there?" and a man's frantic voice yelled, "Help me, my wife is having a baby!!" Was this a trick? I peeked out my door to see a frantic stranger who again begged for help. I responded that I'd get some clothes on, locked the door again, and pulled on some jeans. When I got to the door the man was gone. What was happening? Was I in danger? What made him pick my door? This was the kind of apartment where the stairways and hallways are covered but semi-outdoors, so anybody could come to any door. I was confused, scared, and shaking in my bare feet!

Finally, a door down the hall opened and the man again shouted for help. I ran to him, stepped inside, and saw a woman in a bathrobe holding a baby in a towel. The man said, "This is my wife and my new son." Still confused and shaken, I asked how old the baby was and was told about three minutes. The man explained that he needed to take his wife and baby to the hospital and he needed me to stay there because they had a daughter sleeping in a bedroom. After they left, I wandered around, found the little girl asleep, saw a huge mess in the bathroom, and went and collapsed in confusion on the couch. Just as suddenly I heard scurrying in the kitchen and an

animal the size of a large cat raced into the living room and stopped and stared at me with his back arched. I screamed and jumped onto the couch and we glared at each other for a good few minutes before I finally guessed that it was a pet. Guinea pig, I think, although I had never seen one. I went to the kitchen and saw the food and water bowls, so I decided that I was probably safe. After a few minutes he went away and I collapsed again and contemplated my situation. How bizarre that I was babysitting for people when I did not even know their names, nor did they know mine. And how did they know I was there? What was going on in this strange world?

A few hours later when the man came home, he explained that he knew where I was staying because this was an all-male apartment building, his wife was the building manager, one of the track team guys had asked her permission for me to stay there during the shut-down. All news to me. He explained that his wife got up to go to the bathroom and had a contraction. She screamed for him but he is a heavy sleeper, finally heard her screams but then could not find his glasses. He took one look at her and ran to get me, then ran back in time to see her baby landing in the toilet.

Aftermath

I think that Miami was closed for about two weeks, with the term ending later in May. When it re-opened we had lost about one fourth of an 8-week quarter system, so that students having at least a C average in a course were given a choice to accept a pass/fail grade or to continue for the full grade. I remember being thrilled to drop German and accept a passing grade, and I remember working very hard for my A in geology. I forget what my other courses were.

Looking Back

Today, as I write these recollections during the 2020 Covid-19 shut down, I think about the 1970 shut down and the past 50 years since then. Then, as now, suddenly the world we knew was gone. The world changes in ways that we never imagine. And I, too, have also grown and changed in ways I could not have imagined 50 years ago, living a full life filled with blessings, challenges, disappointments, losses, personal discoveries, joys, friendships and love.

And in a few days, somewhere in this world, a man I once met at the age of three minutes will be celebrating his 50th birthday. I wonder if he knows he was born into a toilet.

Christine Ann West

Miami University Class of 1971 (BA) & 1972 (MS)