

Curtis L. Hancock¹
Rockhurst Jesuit University
Kansas City, Missouri, USA

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Some Formative Years: Lessons from a Friendship

Leaping ahead to my high school experience, it was marked by many close friendships, some of whom are still a part of my life—such as my close friendship with Jasper Bidy, Alan Lacer, and my former track coach, Gary Lower. But I would like to single out for reflection my defining friendship with a mercurial personality named Jerry DeWoody.

Jerry was a star athlete, a very accomplished wrestler. While he was not tall, standing only five feet eight inches, he nonetheless had a kind of commanding presence. He was a serious body builder, unusual for a mere teenager. So, he had a rock-hard, ripped body by the age of sixteen, soon to have the chiseled features of a trained wrestler. In fact, he was a student of body building, paying attention to the art and science of perfecting a physique and the aesthetics of the muscular human form. His striking physique and athletic presence, of course, commanded the respect of the boys in my high school, an enormous school with a senior class of eight-hundred students. Jerry and I had athletics in common, but we had other talents that would cement a friendship.

My junior year I happened to enroll in a rhetoric class, titled “Speech and Debate.” When asked to construct and present speeches in class, or especially when asked to speak extemporaneously, DeWoody and I discovered that we would speak about the same things. Often the themes were sports. But at other times, the subject matter would concern politics. Both of us had a rather anarchist perspective. Our viewpoints on politics were, of course, sophomoric at best. But we were able to capture readily the attention of the class by the novelty of what we would say and the sheer adolescent brashness that was our motive. The

¹ **Curtis Hancock** is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Rockhurst University, a Jesuit institution in Kansas City, Missouri, USA, where he held the Joseph M. Freeman Chair of Philosophy for twenty years. He has a B.A. and M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Oklahoma, and a Ph.D. from Loyola University of Chicago. He is former President of the American Maritain Association and co-founder of the Gilson Society. He has published several books, including *Recovering a Catholic Philosophy of Elementary Education* (Mount Pocono, Pennsylvania: Newman House Press, 2005). He has also published numerous articles and reviews. He has been active in America and Europe writing and lecturing on political philosophy, education, ethics, and philosophy of religion. He is an occasional contributor to *Nasz Dziennik*. The following recent publications are representative of Dr. Hancock’s interests: “The Mystery of Suffering,” in *Dialogue: A Journal of Religion and Philosophy*. Issue 56, April 2021, 26-31; “Aquinas as a Guide for Teaching Philosophy,” in *Encyclopedia of Teacher Education*, M.A. Peters, editor. Singapore: Springer, 2019; “Peter Redpath’s Philosophy of History” in a *Festschrift in Honor of Peter A. Redpath, Studia Gilsoniana*, 5:1, 2016, 55-93; “The One and the Many: The Ontology of Science in Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 69, December 2015, 233-59; “Gilson on the Rationality of Christian Belief,” *Studia Gilsoniana*, 1, 2012, 29-44.

word got out to the wider school that Hancock and DeWoody had designed a whole new world order in speech class. Students in the lunchroom would ask us to repeat some of our political harangues. We enjoyed a kind of celebrity for this, which endured to an extent even into our senior year.

By the time of Christmas our junior year, we had formed a strong friendship. In contrast to DeWoody's physique, I was a skinny distance runner. He weighed 170 lbs. with a wrestler's pedigree. I was a mere 135 lbs., waiting for a growth spurt, which didn't come until my freshman year in college, although I had topped out at nearly six feet before leaving high school. I gained nearly twenty pounds between my senior year in high school and my sophomore year in college. Some of this was because Jerry tutored me in weightlifting. I would take him on runs to reciprocate. He hated running, likening it to a kind of torture. My love of running was an object of consternation to him. Because he couldn't fathom it, he admired me for it.

One benefit from my friendship with DeWoody was that I never had to worry about encounters with bullies. I say "encounters" because I never put up with bullies. As a result, I endured a few good beatings. But bullies left me alone because they judged I was a nuisance. Some of them could crush me, but I earned the reputation of being someone who would put up a fight (however feebly) and the bullies took up the policy "why bother with him, when there are easier victims to bully." In addition to my own efforts, DeWoody helped give me some "street cred" because of my association with him. The logic seemed obvious: "If DeWoody's the toughest guy in the school, and I'm his friend, there must be something to admire about me." I had an immunity from bullies because of this association. In spite of his vices and moral incoherencies, DeWoody had a sense of outrage about overt injustice and a sense of protection for the vulnerable. He was horrified by gratuitous meanness or cruelty of any kind. He couldn't stand the thought, for instance, that people could be cruel to animals.

There was one incident in which a student suddenly showed up at our high school. He had transferred in from another school. He was a tall, big-boned kid, who recognized me as someone he had tried to bully some years before when I used to go to a local swimming pool with friends. He bullied many kids. I was one of them. But after a summer I never saw him again. He seemed to want to pick up where his bullying had left off years before. But I remember DeWoody expressly getting in his face and telling him if he saw him pestering me again, he would punch his lights out. The bully postured in protest, pretended he wasn't threatened by DeWoody. But we all knew it was bluster. He never so much looked at me again the rest of the school year.

Because of my friendship with Jerry, I was allowed to enter his orbit of other friends. Many of these guys were wrestlers, or “wanna-be” wrestlers. Many of them were brutes. After high school some of them disappeared. Later I would meet some of them on the University of Oklahoma campus. They had at last enrolled in college. I remember one of them, whose family had a horse-ranch outside Oklahoma City. I used to visit him often. One day he trapped me in corral with a spirited horse. He shouted at the horse, calling him in such a way that the horse would run right at me, stopping at the last moment. My friend’s family was active in rodeo, so the horse might have been trained to stop. But that was not something I could have known. The experience was terrifying. I eventually found a way to escape the corral (my friend never helped me escape). I never went back to my friend’s home, having inferred from this event (and other episodes) that he was probably a psychopath.

I ran upon him some years later at the University campus. I inquired where he had been the many years since high school. He said calmly, “I’ve been in Big Mac.” Big Mac is slang for McAlester, the town where the state penitentiary of Oklahoma is located. His confession came as no surprise. Sadly, several people whom DeWoody knew spent some time in prison. Jerry himself, I’m happy to report, escaped that fate.

I spent considerable time my last two high school years with Jerry and his gang of rough friends. Somehow, I fit in and was comfortable in their company. They liked my quirky sense of humor and what passed for wit among adolescents. I had different cohorts of friends and I could retreat regularly retreat from DeWoody’s gang and find refuge among my other friends, with whom I ran cross-country and track. So, while I would talk to Jerry daily, and routinely see him at school, I would sometimes seek other company at night. On average, I would hang out with Jerry and his minions once or twice a week. Looking back, this was a good thing. After not seeing them for a few days, I would often hear in school about what wild and dangerous adventures they did without me. The next two days I might meet up with them again and be swept up in new and risky endeavors.

While my credential as an athlete made me immediately respectable to DeWoody, it was other things that we had in common that supplied the deeper bond in our friendship. He was a naturally poetic soul. In other words, he had a profound sense of wonder, which gave him a zest for life. He had a knack for Socratic discussion, but his mind lacked discipline and rigor, and thus being a philosopher would not have been his calling. But this difference need not have been an impediment to our friendship, especially in light of Aristotle’s observation that poetry and philosophy have a kinship by their common origin in wonder.

A poetic habit of mind described DeWoody. In fact, he formally and practically applied his sense of wonder to the poet's task. Jerry read, memorized, recited, and wrote poetry assiduously. He introduced me to the genius of great poets. My enduring love for them owes much to his influence. He did not hide this interest in poetry from others, but few were sophisticated enough to recognize its value for his life. But with me it was different. His interest in poetry stimulated my intellect and expanded my learning. Jerry's influence had a kind of poetic magic that bettered my life.

He was keenly aware himself of his poetic temperament. This temperament impelled him to write his own poetry. He was fascinated with the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas. He read several biographies of Dylan Thomas and bought recordings of Dylan Thomas himself reading his own poetry. He digested the biography of Thomas written by his wife Caitlin. Jerry was proud of a particular poem he penned, with the opening verse with "Run Lemming Run/In your eyes the burning sun." I smile at the words now, but at the time I thought it was brilliant. As the title suggests it was an immature concept, but Jerry was able to ape Dylan Thomas's style with some effect.

But it wasn't Jerry's own poetic writings that occasioned our many conversations. Instead it was the writings of great English and American poets. Jerry had whole passages of poetry memorized especially the Romantic poets. He had a fascination for the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley. He had some command of Coleridge and Byron too. Since I was familiar with Wordsworth and Blake, we could pass the time reciting passages of these greats. To this day, I can recite Shelley because DeWoody committed him to my ears repeatedly.

My friendship with DeWoody helped me develop as an athlete. He took an interest in my athletic ambitions and spoke to me words of motivation, with his own poetic flair. For a couple of weeks during the summer of 1967, my parents (for some reason I do not remember) traveled out of state. I asked to be left behind, and they obliged. During those weeks I saw DeWoody every day. He would stay with me through the evening. Around 10:30 in the evening, I would take him home. I would time the return so that I could listen to Jim Morrison and *The Doors* on the radio just after I dropped him at his house. Before I arrived at my house, I would stop at Woodson Park, about a mile from my home, and run twice around a two-mile course I had measured there. This training was always at night. I jokingly called this routine "The Transylvanian Games," explaining that my training could only take place in the dark.

My peculiar program worked. My strength and stamina improved beyond my dreams over that summer. By the start of the cross-country season in 1967, I had transformed myself

from a middle-of-the-pack runner to a contender for the state title in cross-country. I enjoyed the jaw-dropping looks on my coaches' and teammates' faces when I returned to the high school campus in September.

Race after race, I improved steadily through the fall of 1967. I did not win the state cross-country title, but I did finish third. By May of 1968, I was runner-up in the state 3200-meter race. This was a gratifying outcome given that I lost 6 weeks of training in the winter because a schoolmate during the Christmas holiday intentionally tripped me in a touch football game and broke my ankle. I didn't realize this for several weeks. By the time it was diagnosed it was mid-February. By then it had begun to heal without medical attention. But almost another month passed before I could train seriously. Some of my friends were disappointed that I did not win the state title in the event. But I was pleased, because I knew better than they the hiatus in training I had had to overcome to be competitive.

These and other successes got the attention of some college coaches. I would accept the offer from the University of Oklahoma. I matriculated there in the fall of 1968, earning a place on the cross-country team even as a freshman.

Jerry had a relatively successful senior year himself. But when I ended the school year fortified with enthusiasm that my success prophesied a bright future, Jerry's state of mind was different. I watched him decline the summer after our high school graduation. I don't think I ever saw him sober. He was becoming an object lesson in how one's vices can waste away one's life.

Jerry loved alcohol, a liquid he affectionately called "ignorant oil." He had an addictive personality. When I was in college, living in Norman, Oklahoma, he would come to visit and confess that he was high on this or that banned substance. He always bristled when people questioned (which I seldom did) his right to indulge in such habits. The Libertarian Thomas Szasz says that implicit in the Bill of Rights of the American Constitution is the "right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of highs." Jerry was Libertarian in that way. When someone struggles with a character deformation, sometimes it takes another variable to push him to a tipping point. No pun intended, but booze was Jerry's tipping point. It never crossed my mind at the time that someone in high school could be an alcoholic. But looking back, several of my friends and acquaintances earned that diagnosis.

It's a miracle Jerry didn't die young from his alcoholic indulgences, not because of the alcohol *per se* but because he was a risk-taker and often put himself in dangerous situations. I know this personally because, while I did not drink, I was often with Jerry as we instigated participation in dangerous diversions. When the riskiest events were undertaken with a

crowd, it was usually Jerry and I who took the lead in such folly. Two pastimes occupied our time: (1) riding oil-well pumps, which abound in Oklahoma, and (2) climbing radio and television towers.

When we were in high school, the KOCO television tower had just been built. At that time, it was the tallest man-made structure in the world, towering over 1,572 feet. I was constantly cajoling my friends to climb it with me. One night I convinced them. Jerry and I joined two friends who excelled in track (Dave Chambers and Larry Rose, the latter being an Oklahoma running legend, who would later run faster than four minutes for the mile). We stealthily crossed the grounds to the tower, surprisingly discovered the entrance open to the fence surrounding its base, and enthusiastically commenced climbing it.

It was a beautiful, warm Oklahoma summer night, without a cloud in the sky. It took several hours to climb to the top. Dave and Larry, my two track buddies, had the good sense to abandon the venture at about 800 feet. Jerry and I continued to the top.

At the top was a fierce wind. Had the temperature been cool below, there would have been an unbearable wind chill at the top. But, as I said, it was an exquisite night, with just the right temperature. The wind was daunting, however. Jerry removed his shirt and the wind caught it propelling it North to Kansas, if not Nebraska. Oklahoma City is built on a prairie, so from our vantage point, where some airplanes fly, we could see the lights in every direction for miles upon miles.

There was an antenna at the top. Not content to have risked his life already, Jerry dared to climb the antenna. But footing wasn't right, so discretion and sanity prevailed at last. Tired of shouting over the summer gale, we finally retreated down the tower.

While this was the only television tower we climbed, scaling radio towers of lesser height was routine, a veritable pastime. On a recent trip back home, a glance at a tower triggered my memory, and I recalled that I had climbed it by myself—one day in high school, just to pass the time on an otherwise idle Saturday. As I drove by the tower on Interstate 35, I glanced toward its top and saw the platform on which I sat and where I enjoyed a snack. It is a sign of how routine tower climbing became that I had for years overlooked and had forgotten that tower and climb—strange since that is the only tower that I ever climbed solo.

During high school, just about anything could become an excuse for climbing radio towers, even winning a game of chess. Throughout my senior year, I had a reputation for being able to play a successful game of chess. Later in college I was so humbled by genuine chess players that I gave up the pursuit. But in high school nobody could defeat me. A friend of mine, another wrestler, got some professional tutelage and challenged me to a chess duel. I

accepted the challenge on the condition that the loser had to climb a radio tower with one hand tied behind his back.

I won the chess match in a handful of moves. He accepted his defeat and with me climbing behind him, fulfilled the terms of the agreement. High school “honor” being what it was, he knew he could not suffer the disgrace back at school having failed to satisfy a wager that he accepted in the first place. The radio tower we climbed was not too far from our homes. It stood about 400 feet, small by our reckoning. Had I lived in the alpine country, I’m sure I would have discharged my love of altitude by regularly climbing mountains. But when one lives on the prairie, one looks for an alternative way to satisfy the urge.

Nowadays when I drive through Oklahoma City, fifty years later, I observe those towers and am puzzled why they were so easy to access. I notice today that they are much more secure around their base. I wonder if foolish adolescents died bringing attention to the danger of easy access to those structures.

As risky as these climbs were, when they come to mind at 3:00 in the morning, they don’t awaken me with a fright. However, riding bucking oil-well pumps does sometimes awaken me with a fearful gasp. These oil pumps, some of them enormous, are all intricately mechanized. There is no margin for error when one plays on one of these monsters. A horrible, mangled death would await one should he be so unfortunate as to fall into the churning mechanisms of the machine that drives the arm of the pump up and down.

But we were unfazed by their danger, trying to take advantage of them, not unlike Quixote commanding windmills. I discovered a way to stand up behind the huge beam, so that when it descended, I could jump hold and ride it way into the air. One had to negotiate the landing correctly or one could fall off the platform into the internal machinery. Not to be outdone in my inventiveness for danger, DeWoody discovered that one could lie beneath the boons, the enormous, rounded steel mechanisms that rotated clockwise to the earth for 360 degrees, and that connected with other parts of the machine to move the beam above. DeWoody decided to lie down under the boon to see how narrowly it missed his body and head as it rotated downward. There were inches to spare. It was perilous but a source of fun. We took turns putting beer bottles on our foreheads, which the boon would smash as it would circle down inches from our faces.

The boon-amusement, for me, didn’t compare with riding the beam. But I reduced, if not stopped altogether, my “beam rodeo,” as I called it, after one day having a close call. We saw a big pump standing in a field that we hadn’t ridden before. I decided to run to it and jump upon the platform to catch the beam. As I grasped the beam, my hand felt the

slipperiness of oil-soaked steel. I had never encountered anything like it before. Gripping the beam had always been secure. It never crossed my mind that my grip could fail. But I was not familiar with this particular machine. Fortunately, as my hands slipped backward, they were arrested by some congealed grease that enabled me to fix my hold just enough for one up-and-down revolution. I got off the oil pump as quickly as possible. When I came down, my friends could tell by my expression that I had just survived a brush with disaster. I was visibly shaken. I don't remember if anyone heard me, but I muttered the title of W.W. Jacobs' short story, "The Monkey's Paw." If DeWoody overheard me, he got the point of the reference.

One of the reasons Jerry admired me was my confidence (or foolhardiness) as a risk-taker. Being an imprudent youth, my risk-taking would sometimes cross the threshold to recklessness. My third year in college, I was annoyed to discover one day that I had accidentally locked myself out of my apartment. Seized by impatience (a vice I suffered in those days, but one I learned to tame), I marched outside the building angrily and proceeded to climb its outer wall until I reached the windows of our apartment. Once at the windows, I removed my shoe, and used it to break out one of them. Once broken, I reached in and unlocked the window, being careful not to cut my arm or hand on the broken glass. I opened and gained entry. Later, I was unnerved considering the consequences of a fall had I not succeeded in conquering that wall. There was a spiked fence below, which I had not noticed before, or had not cared to notice.

A few years ago (at age 64), I was at a playground entertaining my wife's great nephew and niece. I ran up the playground slide seeking to grab a hand hold at its top—a maneuver one can usually manage on slides. For some reason, there was no way to find a grip at the top of this one. I did a couple of inelegant somersaults going backward down the slide. My head landed inches from a brick wall surrounding the garden at the corner of the playground. Looking at me quizzically, my wife's nephew observed, "Curtis, you're a risk taker, aren't you?" I only smiled, thinking to myself. "You don't know the half of it."²

Jerry had another pastime: swimming across Oklahoma reservoirs, some of them miles wide. Even though Oklahoma is landlocked, with a dearth of big rivers, and a relatively dry climate, it has a large measure of coastline mileage, almost as much as any other state in the Union. The reason is that in the forties, fifties, and sixties Oklahoma had a powerful senator,

² A year before this I underwent rotator-cuff surgery because I took up unsuccessfully roller blading! On the threshold of being a septuagenarian, I've learned to settle down. Someone tried to kill me in December of 2016 in a traffic accident. I'm happy to report the accident was not my fault. I don't take foolish risks while driving. The culprit was texting. I was the victim.

John S. Kerr, (founder of Kerr-McGee Oil), whose clout in Congress enabled him to garner vast federal money to finance the Army Corps of Engineers to build a multitude of dams and reservoirs. By luck I never participated on this risk-taking adventure with Jerry and his other friends. I was either otherwise engaged when he schemed up these swims or I was spared the risk by the intervention of my Guardian Angel. I was annoyed that I missed out on the fun when I heard about these swims. But I'm content today, and consider myself fortunate, that I was absent.

In May of 1968, Jerry and I graduated. I merrily went off to college and put all these distractions behind me. I had four rewarding years at the University, where I discovered my academic potential and continued (for two years) to participate in cross country and track. I earned a letter twice at OU in cross country and congratulated myself for being able to win a place on a team at a Division I school.

Jerry, I believed, was living a similar life. In the autumn after high school, he enrolled in Northwestern Oklahoma State University, a small four-year college in Alva, Oklahoma, where he continued to wrestle. Oklahoma is a state where the sport of wrestling is popular. The major universities in the state, the University of Oklahoma and Oklahoma State University, are perennial powers in the sport. But even the smaller schools have active programs. I also believed that Jerry would have found stimulation in college life, given his interest in poetry, literature, and creative writing. But it turned out that he did not find college agreeable, or should I say college did not agree with him. He told me that he publicly called his English teacher stupid and made it clear to the students in the class that they would be better off if he, Jerry, were their instructor. Since the college did not agree to this replacement of a faculty member with an unqualified student, Jerry left school and town in a huff.

Since he was no longer in college, Jerry could not benefit from the college deferment for military service, an exemption which kept college-enrolled men (like me) away from being conscripted for the Vietnam war. Jerry was soon drafted and sent to basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas. Within a month of basic training, he challenged his drill instructor in a way analogous to how he challenged his college English instructor. The difference is that Jerry threatened his military superior with physical violence. He was summarily thrown into the stockade. Convinced that he was incorrigible, the Army dismissed him from service with an undesirable discharge.

While I never asked them about it, I'm sure this was an embarrassment to his parents. Jerry's father, who was a prominent municipal leader in Oklahoma City, eventually becoming County Clerk, distinguished himself in the Pacific theater in World War II. In fact, he was a

marine combat veteran, whose assignment was to drive amphibious wagons onto beaches (like Guadalcanal and Saipan) and unload marines. His son's disgraceful dismissal is not something he would have understood. Jerry, however, was more than indifferent. The few times I saw him subsequently, he seemed to wear his "undesirable discharge" like a badge of honor.

While I had, as I remarked earlier, many friends in high school, I have focused on Jerry DeWoody because my friendship with him is revelatory of some dimensions of my own personality and character. But mainly he deserves attention as an object lesson of a tragic life. I learned from him some positive things, but the most enduring lesson is a negative one. I learned that when one struggles with a character deformation, it can smother the good habits that one has, and when fueled by a stimulus like excessive alcohol, it can ruin one's life. Aristotle argues that one vice, even if adjoining a hundred virtues, is enough to undermine one's character. When I think of DeWoody, I get Aristotle's point.

After I went away to college, I continued to see Jerry. I would occasionally fetch him from his home and drive him to spend time with me in Norman. But eventually I decided he was not a constructive influence in my life, and I let the relationship drift away. Since I had acquired exemplary friends, their contrast with Jerry was not lost on me. Since Jerry did not drive, it was not hard to let the relationship ultimately end. If I did not drive to transport him for a visit, the visit would not happen. In time, our relationship just slipped away into the night.

One day about five years later, I was driving on the streets of Oklahoma City and passed him. He was not driving—predictably, he was occupying another's passenger seat. We both saw each other, as he turned a corner. He looked at me with delight and gave me a warm wave. I enthusiastically waved back. But I did not stop. I never saw him again. Fifteen years ago, my friend Jasper, who was still residing in the Oklahoma City area, told me that he heard a news report that Jerry DeWoody, the son of the late County Clerk, had died. He drowned trying to swim across an Oklahoma lake while drunk.

Some Final Reflections. Curiously, athletics made a philosophical impression in an important way. Experience in sports reminds one that one has a body. As a philosopher, I became very aware of the fact that human beings are embodied persons. Athletics does not permit one to forget that truth. So, I'm convinced that I had a disposition to a philosophy of the human person that might be called "integral humanism" or "integral personalism" on account of my impression that we are ensouled bodies. As a result, I had a disposition to resist Cartesianism

and radical dualistic tendencies in accounts of the human person. So, later when I discovered the philosophical anthropology of St. Thomas Aquinas, I appreciated his effort to emphasize the unity of the human being, even if hylomorphically the human being is a combination of body and soul. I've always had a suspicion of radical materialism and radical dualism. The "Ghost in the Machine" legacy in the history of philosophy is an embarrassment. Athletics taught me experientially and phenomenologically that the unicity of the human person is fundamental for any sound philosophical anthropology. In other words, I attribute intuitions about the centrality of the unity of the soul-body relationship to my experiences as an athlete.

I should close with a word on how friendship can edify one philosophically. Aristotle and Cicero are famous for their analysis of the nature of friendship. When I read their work, I recognized immediately their lessons about vice and virtue in human relationships. I was able to grasp their lessons against the backdrop of my many friendships, especially my association with DeWoody. The classical philosophers remind us that friendship is significant for character formation. It can sadly be significant in character malformation too. DeWoody was not, on balance, a positive influence. The better angels of my nature seemed to speak to my youthful mind, and I let the relationship drift. I learned from his example that a few virtues—and he had an impressive few—are not enough to make a person admirable. When I later studied Aristotle's and Cicero's account of the primacy of virtue in friendship, I could rely on DeWoody in my mind's eye as an object lesson of mixed character. I am grateful that I had the good sense to learn from that lesson.