Acceptance Speech for Lon Tinkle Award

Texas Institute of Letters April 6, 2013

I'd like to thank my friends in the TIL who thought I've been productive enough—and I guess old enough—to qualify for this award and to be included among so many writers whose work I admire, and so much of which has been important to the development of my own career. One of the past recipients of the Lon Tinkle award whom Bill Wittliff neglected to mention was Bill himself. Over the decades Bill has helped set the bar for all of us, and he's been a continuing inspiration to me as well as a great friend. And as I hope you all got a chance to see first-hand this weekend, Bill and Sally have created something really unique with the Wittliff Collections, an institution whose very existence gives heart to Texas writers and places all our scattered works in a lasting and coherent context.

My wife Sue Ellen is here tonight, and our oldest daughter Marjorie and her husband Rodney, and our youngest daughter Charlotte and her fiance Zach. And I've been soundly scolded by our middle daughter Dorothy for not telling her about this event far enough in advance to make it possible for her and her husband Mike to change their travel plans and be here as well. Receiving this award in the presence of so many family members and so many friends makes me think back to a time when I was just starting out as a writer and was under the illusion that to succeed at this supposedly sacred vocation I must be unfettered, free from all conventional distractions. A writer who was really serious

about his craft, I had allowed myself to believe, had to be a lone wolf, had to hold himself apart and be suspicious if not outright contemptuous of ordinary human striving.

It took me awhile to understand that while this might be an authentic way for some writers to live, for me it was just a pose. I could never have been the solitary outsider of my imagination because at heart I was an insider. I didn't just tolerate things that were ordinary and conventional, I craved them. Life, for me, couldn't get much better than dinner with my family at Luby's. In retrospect, I see that nothing could have killed my imagination faster than the heroic detachment I thought I needed, nothing could have been more meaningless for me than an unbothered life self-consciously consecrated to art.

More than anything I needed people. Being a husband and a father, as it turned out, didn't tie me down; it freed me from the tiresome tyranny of my own self-importance. It set the stakes higher, made my writing time more urgent and valuable, and helped clarify the boundary between what mattered and what didn't.

Beyond my family, I needed peers and confidantes. You can't maintain a writing career without some way of sustaining your morale, and that's where friends came in. For most of us, the markers of progress are faint, while failure is usually glaringly obvious. You need people you trust to help show you the way, to keep you on the path when you can't see it for yourself.

An award like this momentarily dispels the fog, but success itself is elusive and it's hard to know what it really looks like. Years ago, when Larry Wright and I were writing screenplays

together, most of our lunchtime conversations devolved to the same theme. What would it be like if we were successful? How would we know? The definition of success we arrived at —to be thought well of by critics and discerning readers, to somehow make enough money to write the kinds of books we wanted to write—was disarmingly modest but it continues to be the work of a lifetime to attain.

Somewhere in the storage shelves of the Wittliff Collections is a battered paperback book, published by Signet in 1960 for thirty-five cents, that I bought when I was twelve years old at the Lamar Park drugstore in Corpus Christi Texas. On the front cover, in big type, were the words “The Alamo”, but below that in much smaller type, it read: “Original title: 13 Days to Glory.” And below that was the author’s name: Lon Tinkle, the man in whose memory this award is given.

This edition of Tinkle’s book about the siege of the Alamo was a tie-in to the much-anticipated John Wayne movie that came out later that year. On the back were blurbs from J. Frank Dobie and Tom Lea, names that meant nothing to me at the time.

I went home and read that book with the sort of absorption only a child who is encountering a new world for the first time can experience. I remember the chair I was sitting in when I finished it. I still remember, fifty-two years later, some of its phrases and passages. This movie tie-in edition was, in a sense, the book that started it all for me, the book that first gave me the idea that my own state, and its history, could be interesting; the book that

made me wonder whether it might be possible for me too to be a writer.

Seven or eight years later, when I was in college at UT and ran into a friend of mine who was going to SMU, I asked him if he had ever heard of Lon Tinkle, since I knew the author of my book taught English there. He told me that sure he had; in fact, he was taking a class from him that semester. I had brought that cheap paperback edition of 13 Days to Glory—now held together with masking tape-- to college with me, and I grabbed it off the shelf and asked my friend if there was any possibility that he could ask Lon Tinkle to sign it. When I saw him again, a few weeks later, he handed the book back to me. On the moldering paperback flyleaf Lon Tinkle had written “To Steve Harrigan” and then signed his name below it.

Lon Tinkle was the first author to ever sign a book I owned. Indeed, he was the first author I ever met, even though we didn’t really meet except in a one-degree-of-separation sort of way. It thrilled me to think that the person who had written these pages had actually held my copy of the book in his hands, had used his pen to write my name.

I don’t have such an inflated view of writers anymore, but Lon Tinkle will always be in a special unassailable category. Because of him, I developed a love of narrative history and an enhanced love of reading in general. Because of his book and the blinding spell it cast on me as a twelve-year-old boy, I went on to write The Gates of the Alamo, which is the book of mine that sold more than any other and insured that I would have the opportunity to write more books after that.

For me, in my time, in my place, Lon Tinkle was as crucial an inspiration as Hemingway or Faulkner or Tolstoy or Willa Cather or any of the other writers who would later astonish and motivate me.

I'd be willing to bet that Lon Tinkle wrestled, as we all do, with the idea of whether his career had been a successful one. Probably, like most of us, he thought he could have done better, could have sold more books during his lifetime, could have had more confidence he would be remembered after his death.

It would no doubt please him to know that just last week I saw his book—now restored to its proper title of 13 Days to Glory—for sale in the Austin airport. He's still in print, and for writers that's pretty much everything. But he'll probably never be a household name, except in my household and those of a few appreciative readers here and there. That will be the fate of most of us in this room—if we're lucky. By most standards, that's not much of a definition of success.

But here's one area where the idea of writers as people who are unbound by conventional standards does hold some value. We want it all, of course—wealth and worldwide respect and undying fame—but we might just settle for something less; to be, like Lon Tinkle, an unexpected link in a quiet chain of inspiration, to write a book that might lead to other books being written.

I'm grateful to Lon Tinkle for being that link for me, for showing me the way to my own career, and I'm grateful to you for honoring me with this award in his name.

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