

GIT-TAR LESSONS
OR
LESSONS IN THE KEY OF LIFE

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PRESENTED TO: THE AETHENAEUM SOCIETY

MARCH 2, 1989

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As I have grown older, I have discovered that influences on one's life sometimes comes from unexpected sources. This paper is about such a person and his influence, not only upon myself, but also upon those that he touched, and this paper is, therefore, entitled *Git-Tar Lessons or Lessons in the Key of Life*.

The day I first met him, was one of those typical Kentucky late August afternoons. The year was 1974, and I was just pulling into Lexington, Kentucky filled with the awe and wonder, and yes, fright, of commencing my junior year at the University of Kentucky after having completed two years at the Hopkinsville Community College.

I had driven up in my grandfather's old blue Ford pickup truck loaded to the hilt with all of my worldly possessions. Ken Martin, a friend of mine from Hopkinsville, had asked that I bring his bicycle to Lexington since I was bringing a truck. "Come on by the KA House, Jim, and drop the bike off, and I will introduce you to some of the fellows there".

That sounded good to me because, other than the few people that were transferring from the Community College, I knew very few people on the main campus. I knew that Ken, who was a year ahead of me and had transferred the year before to the main campus, had joined Kappa Alpha Order, a fraternity at the University of Kentucky. I also knew that Ken Dougherty and Pete Turner, two fellows that were a year ahead of me at Christian County High School as well as having gone for one year to the

Community College, had also joined the same fraternity. So, without my knowing at the time, I was being set up to be "rushed".

Now, you have got to understand, that when I left Hopkinsville on that fateful Sunday afternoon, joining a fraternity was the furthestest thing from my mind. While I had been very active in various clubs and organizations at the Community College, my perception of fraternity life was that it was a privilege reserved only for people who had more money and social standing than I did. Be that as it may, I accepted Ken's invitation to come in after I had dropped the bicycle off.

As I came through the back door of the fraternity house, I was greeted with a very loud and raucous laugh. As I turned to see what was making this frightful racket, my eyes spotted a rather short, elderly black man whose shoulders were stooped and whose walk could best be described as a shuffle. His hair was very closely cropped, and he was slightly balding in the front with just a bit of a widow's peak. He was dressed in some very loose, baggy trousers and a pair of what appeared to be worn-out house shoes, a very old shirt and a tan cotton jacket similar to the type you would see a waiter wear. He was still howling like a hyena when I noticed that he didn't have a tooth in his head. Ken said, "Quit that carrying on, old man, and com'ere. I've got someone I want you to meet." Ken said, "Jim, I would like you to meet Git-Tar, and he lives here at the house. He is our

house man, and he takes care of us, and we take care of him." I said, "Pleased to meet you, sir." He replied with another spasm of howling laugh exposing pink gums so that all could see and then growled, "Are you one of the new damn goats?" At this, I realized by the slurring of his words that he had had not a little to drink. Ken saved me as I was groping for some sort of response by saying, "Quit asking so many questions, Git-Tar! You've been to the moon, haven't you?" The little, stooped black man replied, "Dat's rit Ise ben to da moon, and I'm gwyne agin." Ken brushed him aside muttering some obscenity under his breath, and he and I went upstairs to his room and chatted for a while with he and Ken Dougherty. Finally, my curiosity had gotten the better of me knowing that Ken normally uses better English than his pronunciation of the black man's name and a little bit perplexed by what all he had to say, I blurted out, "Ken, just who WAS that guy downstairs! going at is this business about going to the moon?" Well, with that, Ken, both of them, almost fell backwards out of their chairs howling with laughter. Thinking that I was the brunt of some sort of cruel joke, I was about to leave in a huff when they both stopped me. "Wait, sit down, and we will tell you about Git-Tar." I said, "What is it with you two? I know the both of you know the proper pronunciation of guitar, what is with this Git-Tar?" Ken Dougherty replied, "Look, that's how he pronounces his name, and that's what we call him."

They proceeded to tell me his story. Git-Tar's real name was Robert Francis Underwood, and no one really knew where he picked up the pseudonym of Git-Tar. It had been lost down the ages, but the story went that he had shown up one day at the old KA House over on Kalimia Drive some fifteen years ago. At that time, the KA's could have very easily passed as role models for the characters in "Animal House". They had run their house mother off, who was apparently a very prim and proper southern lady, by placing a live snake in her bed one night immediately prior to her retiring.

At any rate, Git-Tar was in need of a job, and a place to stay and so the KA's took him in.

I really got to know Git-Tar well my senior year when I lived in the House and also was the kitchen manager. My position as kitchen manager entitled me to arise at 5:00 a.m. every morning, open the kitchen, get the coffee made, make sure milk and juice were out so that all would be in readiness by the time the cook got there at 6:00 a.m. Git-Tar would usually shuffle in about the same time Hattie, the cook, got there, and he would shuffle into the kitchen with his back all bent and stooped, shake his head and mutter in that distinctive growl of his, "Oh, my mind is bad."

He would fix a cup of coffee while lighting the first of about three packs of Chesterfield unfiltered for the day by pouring a cup of coffee, putting a little cream in the saucer and

a little sugar, pouring the coffee into the saucer and then downing it. He would smack his lips and explain, "Now, that's bettar."

Many times that year while I was sitting in the kitchen, Git-Tar would be sitting back there and we would get involved in some high level discussion. For example, I remember it well the afternoon that we got to talking about him going to the moon, and he stated, "I've come nearer going to the moon than those guys who claim they have been."

I said, "What do you mean, Git-Tar?"

"Dem astronaut people. They ain't ben to no moon. It's all a hoax. Dey took dem people out to the desert in Arizona somewhere and made all dem pictures by trying to pull the wool over everybody's eyes. I know what dey doing."

I replied, "Git-Tar, you're crazy. They have been to the moon. They walked on it."

He replied, "Oh, no, indeed. God wouldn't let dem people walk around on His moon. I know bettar than dat. I know what I am talking about. God wouldn't let it happen. Now, how brown is dat gravy; pretty damn brown!"

This was just before Christmas, and knowing that Alec Russell's, one of my fraternity brothers who lived across the hall from me in the House, first cousin was Neil Armstrong, we hatched a plot.

Right before Christmas break, I was sitting in the

kitchen, and I heard Git-Tar hollering all the way from the front door, "Jim, Jim, Jim, looka here what I got." I went running to meet him, and once again he said, "Looka here," laughing the whole time. He handed me a brown manilla envelope out of which I pulled a slick, glossy 8" x 10" photograph of an astronaut standing on the moon with a flag in his hand. I recognized the photograph as one that had been published after the Apollo 11 mission and knew that it was a photograph of Neil Armstrong. Neil had written a personal caption on the photograph, "From one moonwalker to another, Neil A. Armstrong." Git-Tar was laughing so hard he had tears streaming down his eyes, and I said, "See there. I told you they had been on the moon." He gave me a baffled stare, grinned real big and said, "I still don't believe it, but I will take the picture."

As time grew near for graduation, Git-Tar caught me in the kitchen one day and said, "Jim, I want to tell you something."

I said, "What, Git-Tar."

"I want you to remember me, and come back and see me when you come back for a football game. I always enjoy seeing my boys and find out what's going on with them."

I said, "Well, you know I will."

He said, "Oh, they all say that, but a lotta times they don't remember to come back and see me."

By the time graduation rolled around, I had been

accepted into law school and was thinking about what that experience was going to be like and had put my memories of the times at the fraternity house in my mental trunk. I was to be working for Dixie Pavers again that summer, and making arrangements to move to Covington where I would be attending law school at Northern Kentucky University. One night, I received a call from Russell Johnson (Git-Tar called him Damn Russell). When I picked up the phone, Russell said, "Jim, this is Russell. Git-Tar is gone." All kinds of thoughts raced through my head, but my immediate reaction was that he had left the House. I said to Russell, "Gone where?" Russell replied, "He died last night, Jim. The funeral is tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. I just thought you would want to know."

I don't even recall whether I said good-bye to Russell or not I was so stunned. The memories that I had so carefully packed into my mental trunk suddenly flew back open and flooded me for the better part of that evening. I made a few quick phone calls because I knew I had to go and say goodbye to Git-tar.

On the way to Lexington the next morning, I was in the kind of state when you are deep in thought, by yourself, driving down the highway, and you don't even remember passing certain places or monuments on the way, I thought of all the stories and expressions that Git-Tar had passed along to all of us. He was, though black, enough like my own grandfather that it made the transition from home to college a lot easier and I am not sure I

ever expressed those sentiments to him.

When I arrive at the funeral home, I was a little nervous since obviously it was a black funeral home in the black section of Lexington, and I wasn't sure how many fraternity brothers would be there. As I walked in, I was immediately put at ease as there were easily over a hundred and twenty-five already there at the funeral home. All of us had come for one reason. To pay our last respects to someone who, during an important period of our lives had been a part of our lives.

On the way back, I became very philosophical about the life we had all remembered that day, and I determined that I had learned from Robert Francis Underwood some important lessons. First, to judge people by their lives and their words rather than their appearance, and secondly, that they who have graduated from the college of hard knocks can many times teach those of us who have higher educations about life itself because they have experienced it. If all of the lives that he touched learned from him as I did, then is not that the truest measure of a man.