

The Science of Love

Ralph's plans were to spend the summer of 1951 at home in Pasadena, and then to return to Columbia University in the fall to work on a PhD in anthropology.

Because of his involvement as a student leader in Christian Endeavor, and because he had been to seminary, Ralph was invited to speak at a regular session given in the Los Angeles General Hospital chapel. He almost rejected the invitation because of another talk being given later that night at the First Congregational Church of Hollywood.

The speaker was Frank Charles Laubach, a Congregationalist missionary and educator, well-known around the world for his teaching methods, which, according to his own estimation, had taught "more than 60 million people speaking two hundred languages and dialects" to read. A thirty-cent postage stamp was later produced to honor his work by the U.S. Postal Service. Ralph was especially interested in one of many books written by Laubach called *The Silent Billion Speak*. Although time would be short, Ralph decided to give his talk and then leave directly to hear Laubach's speech.

And so on July 20 Ralph went to the hospital chapel and spoke to a group of student nurses, including a group of young women from Lake Avenue Congregational Church (LACC). At the conclusion, he asked if any of the young ladies would like to go with him to hear Laubach. He had room for five in his car and that many readily accepted the invitation.

On the way back, several of the very conservative young women stated that they did not believe Laubach to be a real Christian, based less upon what he had said than on the fact that he was a Congregationalist missionary, and had chosen to speak at what was considered a "liberal" church. When Ralph asked the group directly whether they thought Laubach a "real" Christian, only one girl replied yes.

The independent voice belonged to Roberta Helm. She was not technically a part of the LACC group; she came, in fact, from an extremely conservative wing of the Nazarene Church—one which tended to separatism. Partly because of her own strong intuitions, and partly because her religious background emphasized the experiential more than the theological, she was able to sense what kind of person Laubach was. That spiritual perception attracted Ralph. He was especially impressed that, although she came from a narrower background, she was willing to ignore peer pressure in order to state her views. Years later, Roberta would describe the situation in the third person in her publication "Winter Initiatives":

Among these [young women in the car] was Roberta Helm, a "Nazarene of the Nazarenes," someone said, because she had long hair and was very conscientious in doing what she felt was right. That Ralph would ever become interested in her was not even an option as far as she was concerned. Their theological backgrounds were different. She "looked" different with her long hair, etc. But he had taught for a year at Pasadena (Nazarene) College and had a great respect for Nazarenes.

Also, her obvious unembarrassed willingness to be "different" appealed to him. He had long known that whomever he married would have to be willing not to fit into the usual mold.

To Roberta's amazement, Ralph asked her out. Of the two, Ralph might have been more surprised. Until that night he thought his vocation might entail celibacy. He had even talked a friend out of marrying in order to devote his life fully to God—Ralph's convictions, at least on his friend's behalf, ran that deep.

Always the engineer, Ralph made a list of things to talk about with Roberta, and on their first date they went through Ralph's list. He must have liked her views because, on their second date, he told her that he thought they should talk seriously about the possibility of getting married!