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'Omaha Blues' Recalls Lost Childhood

Timothy G. Anderson

In 1997, I walked into Joe Lelyveld's office and handed him a newspaper clipping about his parents.

Lelyveld was executive editor of the *New York Times*, and I was one of his nearly 1,100 news department employees.

The clipping, from a *World-Herald* column, noted that the Lelyvelds had once lived in Omaha; that Arthur, Joe's father, had been rabbi at Temple Israel in the early 1940s; that his mother, Toby, had taught at the University of Omaha; and that the Lelyvelds had divorced in 1964. The news was that Toby had died in New York at age 85.

If I thought that taking him the clipping might give me even the most tenuous personal connection to my boss—I grew up in Nebraska, too—I was wrong. Lelyveld, known to have a somewhat awkward manner socially, looked up as I gave him the clipping but said nothing. He offered only a small, enigmatic smile, and I left.

Now, having read "Omaha Blues," Lelyveld's quietly powerful memoir of growing up with parents who often seemed to have little interest in him, I realize that in trying to buy a personal moment with Lelyveld, I may have been using the wrong currency.

Lelyveld began work at the *Times* as a copy boy. During nearly 40 years, he rose from reporter to foreign correspondent, to foreign editor and, eventually, to executive editor. He retired in 2001, only to reprise his role briefly after the Jayson Blair scandal.

Throughout his career, Lelyveld told the stories of others. In "Omaha Blues" he tells a piece of his own story, one of a boy ignored, abandoned even, by his parents, a story of a boy who never seems to be where he wants to be. When the family moves from Cleveland to Omaha, he wishes he were in Ohio; later, when he is shipped off to Brooklyn, he wishes he were in Omaha.

"A pattern had been set: by the time I was six, I was used to not being from this place," Lelyveld writes, "wherever this place happened to be."

For a time, "this place" was Omaha. It was here, in 1943, that he first believed he had become an unwanted burden to his parents. That year, the family went separate directions: His father traveled the country promoting pacifism. His mother summered in New York with his brother.

Joe, 6, was sent to a Tekamah farm.

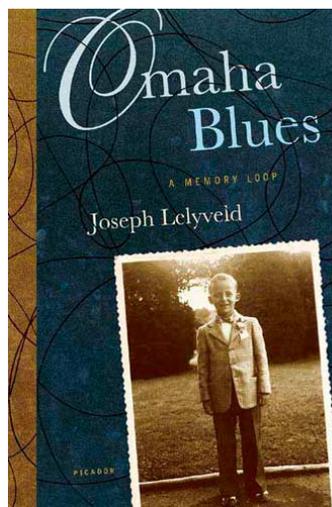
To the boy, the only word to describe his situation was "abandoned." For years, whenever talking to his parents about that summer, he used it. "Decades later, out of lingering grievance or spite, I still managed to work in that word," he writes.

With summer's end, Joe returned to Omaha but soon was abandoned again, sent to stay with grandparents in Brooklyn. The Lelyvelds' marriage is on-again, off-again; upheavals come mysteriously and with little notice; his mother is hospitalized. Joe soon finds he must—and can—take care of himself.

"Omaha Blues" grew out of Lelyveld's decision to write about the sole responsible adult in his early life, Ben Goldstein, who, in Arthur's absence, filled in as father figure. Soon, however, Lelyveld realized he was digging for something else. "Clearly, I was also looking for clues to my sometimes puzzling self; my own history, my own character."

Lelyveld read letters his father had saved, letters between his parents throughout their tumultuous marriage and subsequent divorce, letters often about him. His experience telling the stories of others serves him well: Though the letters are often heartbreaking, Lelyveld relates them without bitterness.

At times Lelyveld's childhood was sad, even tragic, but certainly not at all times. He knew going in that bad memories need not erase good ones. By the end of "Omaha Blues," he discovers that some family stories, and some of his own memories, do not always hold up to journalistic scrutiny.



Timothy G. Anderson worked at the *New York Times* from 1995 until 2004. He now teaches journalism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's College of Journalism and Mass Communications.

