

Joe Tougas
Interviewed by Susan Fiksdal
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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FINAL

Fiksdal: I'm with Joe Tougas on November 11, 2022. This is Susan Fiksdal. We're going to begin Joe's oral history with Evergreen. But we're going to start, Joe, with your youth—where you grew up, something about your parents, and any major influences you had as you were growing up.

Tougas: I was born in Otter Tail County, Minnesota in a town called Pelican Rapids. People don't believe that, that I was born in Pelican Rapids, Otter Tail County, Minnesota.

Fiksdal: It's a beautiful name.

Tougas: When I was six months old, in the middle of the winter, my parents decided to move from Minnesota back to Seattle, where my mother grew up. I tell people, "After six months of Minnesota, in the wintertime, the whole family knew it was time to head west."

Fiksdal: I can believe it, except that it's a terrible time to move. Snow, ice.

Tougas: That just indicates how desperate my parents were to get out of the Midwest. We lived on Queen Anne Hill. I attended Catholic grade school and high school in Seattle, first on Queen Anne Hill, and then Capitol Hill.

What's significant about that period of my life is that it was very religious oriented, specifically very devout Catholic. And the fact that I had nine siblings, and we all were indoctrinated into Catholicism, is significant.

One part of that was that this notion that was very common in Catholic families at that time was, first of all, that you should have lots of children. Then, from those children, at least one, maybe two, would be given to God, either as a priest or as a nun.

I had an aunt who was a nun, an uncle who was a missionary priest in Japan. Another brother who went to the seminary and stayed in the seminary for a year before going off to make his fortune in other ways.

Fiksdal: Where were you in the family?

Tougas: I was the second.

Fiksdal: Oh, so the pressure was on.

Tougas: Yeah. It was obvious from early on that my older brother was not priest material, shall we say.

[laughing] But I was. I was very conscientious and very devout. Gradually, I got infected with evolution and science.

In elementary school, I had this desire to consolidate scientific knowledge and Catholic doctrine. I was really interested in evolution, and about where exactly did monkeys stop being monkeys and become humans. Of course, I had my theories.

But the important part was that I found myself in college having to really make a choice between the doctrines of the church—at that point, I would say, Gonzaga—and then the Jesuits, I think, influenced my own thinking, specifically demonstrated that you could use your mind in the face of, or in addition to, Catholic doctrine.

I was there for three years at Gonzaga from '67 to '70. At that time, the counterculture was in full swing. The Summer of Love, I hitchhiked down to San Francisco with some of my college buddies. We stayed in the Haight-Ashbury just in the middle of that rebelliousness. One result of that was I dropped out of Gonzaga after three years and went to live on a commune.

Fiksdal: Oh, my goodness! This is very radical. Now I need to ask, did you end up at university because that was an intended path all along? You did well in school. You just went? Or did your parents go to college, and they wanted you to go to college? Or other reasons? I shouldn't just say those two.

Tougas: Right. The choice of Gonzaga was interesting. I didn't really know much about Jesuit education, but I had the impression that Jesuits were very smart, and you could, on the basis of your intelligence, find a place where you could explore important questions. At the same time, there were plenty of radical priests. There was all kinds of turmoil in the Catholic Church because of the Vatican Council, and the fact of the cultural changes that were happening.

I had a big idea about myself, and I found a place there at Gonzaga where I could really work on those conflicts. One priest in particular that was really influential on my thinking was a Jesuit. He wrote the letter for me to get out, to get conscientious objector status. Because that war was also . . .

Fiksdal: . . . hanging over you.

Tougas: Yes, so I was able to get that designation as a conscientious objector. Then I needed to arrange my own community service for two years as part of the deal for conscientious objectors.

Fiksdal: Is that full-time or part-time work?

Tougas: It was catch as catch can. After a couple years, they just wanted to know that I had done it. There was an alternative school in Spokane that was part of the radical underground, so we had an arrangement with them.

But the actual time spent doing that work was in parallel with my joining a commune, so the

commune became the launching board for me to do the conscientious objector stuff, and also to declare my own independence and my radical self.

Fiksdal: Somehow, I didn't connect the fact that you were still in Spokane in a commune. Spokane and commune don't go together for me.

Tougas: Right. It gets even more complicated because I got the basic assignment to do the conscientious objector service, but the place that I really wanted to be was at a commune in Olympia. That commune was called Cold Comfort Farm. You may have heard of it.

Fiksdal: I have.

Tougas: Bill Richardson was the owner. It continues to exist, not as a commune but as a farm and as a basis for the retail business, Childhood's End. I ended up there in that commune. There were people from Spokane who had moved. Bill was from the Grays Harbor area.

I dove right in and became a full-fledged member of that commune. Then had a child, the first year on the commune was my son, Morgan. That gave me a sense of doing something productive in a counterculture way. But I knew early, probably while I was still at Gonzaga.

I knew from very early on, even when I was at Gonzaga, that I wanted to be a philosophy professor. I got to know a bunch of people at Evergreen, including different faculty members. I didn't get around to finishing my bachelor's degree at Gonzaga for about 10 years.

In the meantime, I was doing this sign business, earning a living as a sign painter, and being active in a lot of social change organizations, social justice kinds of things, which was just in Olympia, there was a lot of that going on.

Fiksdal: Starting.

Tougas: At that point is where my history merges with the Evergreen story, the Olympia story. I graduated from Evergreen in 1984.

Fiksdal: Such an important year. [laughter]

Tougas: Yeah.

Fiksdal: I'm sorry, but who did you study with in that last year? Do you remember?

Tougas: Oh, yeah. Jean Mandeberg had a program called the Towers Project that was about public art, and in typical Evergreen fashion, we made public art. I don't know if you remember, but Jean Mandeberg designed these two large, metal sculptures, like 12 or 14 feet high.

Fiksdal: I do remember.

Tougas: The pair was divided. It was a town and gown kind of commentary, so one of these sculptures was right next to the rotunda building, and then the gown one was down by Capitol Lake. It was

permitted for six months.

Fiksdal: That's amazing she got that in 1984.

Tougas: Oh, yeah. It was very impressive. It was great to be part of it, too.

Fiksdal: And you all worked on it?

Tougas: We all worked on it. We all learned welding. We all learned safety equipment. Grinding. The metal shop got a real workout, because not only were we doing these two large sculptures, but each of the students had their own sculpture projects that we were working on. It was ideal.

Fiksdal: Of course, I need to know what sculpture was.

Tougas: I did several that were satires on—I was reading all kinds of books about sculpture, plus I was doing sculptural stuff. I still had the sign company, so I was doing a lot of woodworking, metalworking, in connection with the sign business, which then fed into my own work.

Fiksdal: You were already a 3-D thinker, now that I'm thinking about that.

Tougas: Right.

Fiksdal: That worked out really well. That metal shop only allows 13 people in it. There must have been more than that in your group.

Tougas: I think that was before they got so picky about that. [laughter] You needn't share that.

Fiksdal: That's interesting to know.

Tougas: Who's the guy who used to run the metal shop? Was it Doug Hitch?

Fiksdal: Yeah.

Tougas: Doug was a pretty much you do it and then you ask permission later kind of a guy. [laughter] Sorry if that is incriminating evidence or anything.

Fiksdal: No, it's great news about Doug. He was a great person.

Tougas: Right. The Towers Project was fall and winter, and then I needed one more quarter, so I did a contract with Beryl Crowe. That was my challenge about bringing my philosophy into my work, and somehow connected it with the sculptural stuff.

I think whenever Beryl had an opportunity to shape someone's education, his go-to starting point was the archeological evidence for very early human uses of mathematics. He had this one particular book that he apparently loved about the cave paintings.

Tougas: There was this particular book that Beryl thought was an amazing example of how human beings can find evidence for earlier civilizations.

This book was by somebody named Marshack 1707, and Marshack had this theory that these bones that were found in different caves had scratch marks on them, and if you looked at the scratch

marks through a microscope, you could discern when those scratches were made and who was doing it. They could find evidence of particular individuals who had a certain style of making these scratches, and the numbers of the scratchers coincided with the phases of the moon.