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## Professor STORIES

by Burton Blatt, EdD

### THE CHAMELEON WHO WOULD LIGHT UP THE WORLD

John Middlebrooks was a chameleon, but also a professor of American history at Methodist University. He was also the ugliest of human beings, but nevertheless the most beautiful. He would be shunned on first sight, but those who knew him would not leave his presence. He repelled the unaware and pulled the knowing. That is, there were people on earth who would rather be with the devil himself than with him; yet there were others who might rather risk God's wrath than John Middlebrooks' dismay. He was a physical misanthrope with an inner radiance, at once the most unappealing and appealing person on earth.

Have you ever known a person who lights up the room with his entrance, causes people to smile without telling the joke, and makes everyone feel good to be alive when the only thing to cheer about is that he's in their presence? How did this five-foot, four-inch, ill-shapen, too heavy around the middle and to skinny around the neck and the legs, man with bad skin and worse teeth, with too few hairs where they belonged and too many around the ears and on the back of his hands, do it? Speak of inner beauty and inner grace, he proved such lofty notions actually exist outside of the meanderings of wild romantics and wilder still revolutionaries. How did he do it? Better, what did he do?

The colleague who saw himself as a great literary scholar knew that John Middlebrooks—only John Middlebrooks—could understand his work, could not only understand but could discuss and clarify, could not only discuss and clarify but could interpret in ways that almost none but he—the would-be literary scholar—could, that is if he really could, which he couldn't. The colleague who saw herself as a poet surrounded by technicians who spent their time doing things, but would never waste their time merely trying to understand

things, had a confederate in John Middlebrooks, a man who valued her poetry, her sensitivity, her good fight against the philistines. The moralist who would save the world for God if not His people knew for certain that John Middlebrooks "played the heathen" to turn them to the right path, the path that only John and he—the doomed prophet—knew the location of and how to travel it. The scientist could talk with John Middlebrooks for hours about everything from infinite atoms to black holes to entropy to human sacrifice in the name of science, and the scientist's sacrifice in the cause of humanity.

John Middlebrooks wasn't all things to all people, not by any accounting. John Middlebrooks had that rarest of all gifts, that most precious of all attributes, an uncanny capability to bring out in other people that which they held most sacred, most ennobling. The chameleon could not only understand the poet's exotic ideas and overburdened analogies, but he had some sort of knack which helped the poet sharpen and clarify her own work. He had a way to convince the moralist that he was good, that his pose wasn't a pose (which he would have otherwise believed) and that his righteousness wasn't self-righteous (which it would otherwise have been).

John Middlebrooks both listened to what a man appreciated in himself and helped turn the boast from an illusion to the truth, from hypocrisy to understatement. John Middlebrooks saw in people not what they were but what they wanted to become, and then he convinced them that they were right, that this one could be a great scientist, and that one could be a great scholar, and the other one could be that single person on earth who would save the world from itself.

John Middlebrooks was a chameleon. But unlike the reptile who would change to become invisible and, thus, to hide from the world, John Middlebrooks changed to meet the world. John Middlebrooks was both the chameleon and the catalyst. He changed so others would change. It could truly be said that John Middlebrooks gave himself to his fellow man.