

UNFOLDING



AARON BARLOW

enculturation intermezzo

• ENCULTURATION ~ INTERMEZZO •

ENCULTURATION, a *Journal of Rhetoric, Writing, and Culture*, announces the launch of Intermezzo, a series dedicated to publishing long essays – between 20,000 and 80,000 words – that are too long for journal publication, but too short to be a monograph. Intermezzo fills a current gap within scholarly writing by allowing writers to express themselves outside of the constraints of formal academic publishing. Intermezzo asks writers to not only consider a variety of topics from within and without academia, but to be creative in doing so. Authors are encouraged to experiment with form, style, content, and approach in order to break down the barrier between the scholarly and the creative. Authors are also encouraged to contribute to existing conversations and to create new ones.

INTERMEZZO essays, published as ebooks, will broadly address topics of academic and general audience interest. Longform or Longreads essays have proliferated in recent years across blogs and online magazine outlets as writers create new spaces for thought. While some scholarly presses have begun to consider the extended essay as part of their overall publishing, scholarly writing, overall, still lacks enough venues for this type of writing. Intermezzo contributes to this nascent movement by providing new spaces for scholarly writing that the academic journal and monograph cannot accommodate.

Essays are meant to be provocative, intelligent, and not bound to standards traditionally associated with “academic writing.” While essays may be academic regarding subject matter or audience, they are free to explore the nature of digital essay writing and the various logics associated with such writing - personal, associative, fragmentary, networked, non-linear, visual, and other rhetorical gestures not normally appreciated in traditional, academic publishing. Intermezzo essays are meant to be speculative, exploratory, and a mix of the informal and the formal. Essays may come from a variety of disciplinary approaches or may mix approaches.

Intermezzo is meant to be a venue where writers can produce scholarly work in unique ways, outside of institutional or disciplinary expectation, and it takes advantage of digital media as a platform for both content and distribution of timely topics.

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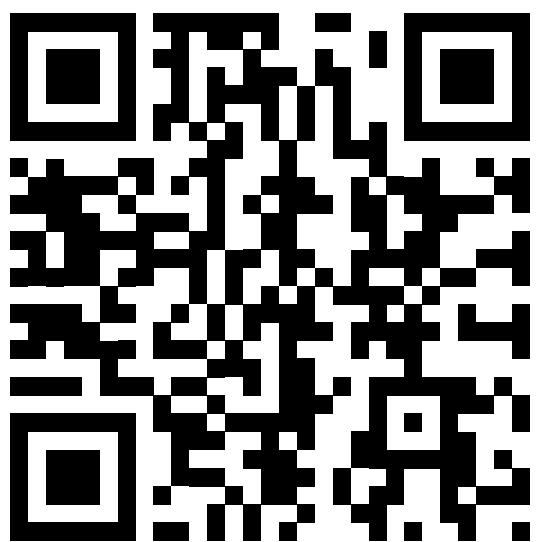
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ISBN-10: 0986433320

ISBN-13: 978-0-9864333-2-0



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by

Aaron Barlow

INTERMEZZO
2016

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My students don't see much mystery in me, a fat white man the age of their grandparents hiding behind a beard and a jacket and a tie. I try to see the mystery in them, but I miss most of it, too, and that does make me feel meager. They are as opaque to me as I am to them.

Many of them, most of whom are first-generation college students, feel they are college outsiders. They see *me* as the ultimate insider, though I feel quite differently. It is all subjective, dependent on individual perspective; we're all outsiders somewhere.

Which is something all of us in academia know. We get the origami of it. Much of our teaching life is involved with figuring out the patterns of our students.

At the same time, it may not even be any of us individually, teachers or students, but academia itself which is the *real* outsider. Maybe none of us in academia has a clue about *anything*. We're not part of the "real world" as long as we teach or until we graduate. Maybe those who claim this are even right; maybe faculty members need to experience the broader world if teaching is to become our calling.

Maybe the divide is necessary. The higher-education gadfly David Horowitz calls for "content" only in the classroom, claiming personal experience is irrelevant, desiring a wall between.

But learning and the college experience call for much more than corrals of knowledge.

The odd thing about teaching is that the "much more" beyond content rarely shows up in what my students see, in what anyone looking into the classroom sees, in what the general public imagines. I sometimes nearly convince myself that it's true, what Horowitz and cultural bean counters say, that all that matters is content and "outcomes." Or, as Lindsay Waters has [described this attitude](#) in *Enemies of Promise*, that "[p]roduct is all that counts, not the reception, not the human use.... For the academic under this regime, his or her life's work has been cordoned off from living experience; practice counts for nothing there" (36).

Then, of course, I come to my senses.

Where the Blog Meets the Academic

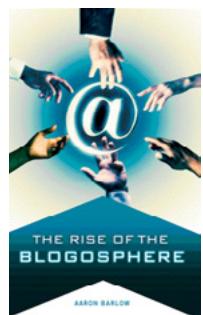
Some writers advise tyros to gain experience before sitting down at the keyboard. Journalist wannabes are told to spend time with their subjects before reporting on them. Me, I was never comfortable as a teacher when I was young. And I didn't like being a reporter. So I accidentally managed to gain that experience and the exposure to my subject that became so important later.

My entry into academia as a career—as a teacher and a writer, which are the same thing in my case—came at a point of surprise and unknowing, both personally and, it turned out, professionally. I was energized at that particular time by a world exploding around me—exploding with information. Movies, for example: I once had to prowl art houses, college film societies, and odd late-night television showings. Later the VCR came along, but the films were bastardized to fit (a process called “pan and scan”) and were presented without context. Now there was the DVD, and I had something to write about. And with. And so much more. Movies, yes, but millions of movies and information about them—in the home. Movies where I write.



The success of *The DVD Revolution: Movies, Culture, and Technology*, the book that resulted, led to a contract for another. Again, I followed an old interest; I'd grown up planning on being a journalist, but that hadn't worked out, not with any consistency. But it had led to my becoming a blogger, so I wrote a book about blogging, arguing that blogging was the logical culmination of several hundred years of American journalism. As a result,

blogging became something of a personal glue, and a connection between teaching and writing—and activism.



Blogging has taken me from my personal blog, [One Flew East](#), to [Daily Kos](#), [E Pluribus Media](#), and, today, [the blog I manage](#) for the American Association of University Professors. I've written about blogging, taught about

blogging, and blogged about blogging. I could even argue that my academic career is a result of *The Rise of the Blogosphere*—and I don’t simply mean the book.

Without blogs, I probably would never have become a professor and would still be trying to hang on with Shakespeare’s Sister, the store and café I once owned and ran. Blogging turned the page on that chapter of my life.

Naturally, when I started thinking about writing about my new career, I knew I would also be writing about—or with—blogging. The “Blogographia” entries that follow resulted.

EMBRACING “ACADEMIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY”

The idea of this exercise in “academic autobiography” was both enticing and distancing for me—in terms of the writing of it and also in terms of its utility. The two, academia and autobiography, like content and subjective experience, are connected in my and every teacher’s life. After a little thought, I embraced the project.

When a teacher shares life details in the classroom, it encourages students to share theirs, creating a starting point for exploration and learning and writing. But it can also be dangerous. I share with my students only a little of my life; I share here as a teacher speaking to other teachers—on background, as a journalist might say. In the classroom, I share as an invitation for others to share, but never as a demand. And I do it with a great deal of care and preparation.

Though I could not see it then, life beyond campus inexorably led to my academic career once I had finally reached the maturity of my fifties. The journey to teaching brought me an appreciation of all sorts of subjectivities and even a glimmer of understanding of the complexities and beauties in all lives, even student lives. Specific to this project, it taught me to view both journalism and teaching in a manner quite different from what I saw as the standards of each field. In journalism, I rejected the possibility of an “objective” stance, of an impartial observer simply reporting dispassionately on events. In teaching, I found it impossible

to distance teacher from teaching from the “content” of the course.

I write little here of what happens in the classrooms where I teach. That teaching is so dependent upon the particulars of each situation that I cannot fruitfully extract anything generalized to share—and that’s not so important here anyway. It’s not as important as what I and my students *bring to* the classroom. From that, we try together to figure what each individual student can *take out*. Background is where teaching starts; individualized outcome is where it continues.

ON OFF CAMPUS

Off-campus events are what made me a writer and a teacher—but they did not happen so I could teach. My goal, when I had one, was to be anything *but* a college teacher. Though I grew up around college campuses, I never felt at home on them.

Before I was a year old, my father took his first teaching job at Georgia Tech. When he arrived in Atlanta, he was asked to sign a loyalty oath. A veteran of World War II, he felt insulted; he also felt that, ethically, signing was not something he should do. Still, he had a wife and young son to support, so he signed, but told the university that he would not be staying beyond the school year. That began a life for him as an academic gypsy. Over the years, he taught at Denison University, Earlham College, Emory University, Thammasat University in Thailand, the Indiana University–Purdue University campus in Fort Wayne, Hope College, Hamilton College, and Kingsborough Community College, a City University of New York campus in Brooklyn where he finally found a permanent academic home. He taught at nine colleges during the first twenty years of his career.

It’s no wonder, looking back, that I didn’t want to go to college. It’s also no wonder that I could find nothing else to do—to some extent, I knew nothing else. By the same token, it was no surprise that I hadn’t a clue what to do with myself when, four years after high school, I graduated from Beloit College, my second college (if you don’t count summer classes at

Brooklyn College). My first job post-baccalaureate was washing down packaging machines at night for Beatrice Foods. I left after three days, stepping up to a job in a scrapyard, shredding and baling old computer punch cards.

That lasted for three weeks.

The strained relationship and distances between the two notwithstanding, I cannot divorce my life outside of academia from my life within it. I cannot even find a personal divide between the two, not even when one includes forklifts. My teaching, as I said, is heavily influenced by my experiences—all of them. All teaching is.

This is one of the reasons that the case of Pulitzer Prize-winner Joseph Ellis fascinated me. He augmented his own experiences for his teaching at Mount Holyoke College. He so wanted to dramatize the content of his courses that he created lies. I try not to do that; the warning, the line he stepped over, is one I always keep in mind.

The Economics Behind

My turn to teaching was an economic move, driven by the downturn caused by the bursting of a dot-com bubble around the turn of the century. If my store had continued to do well, I



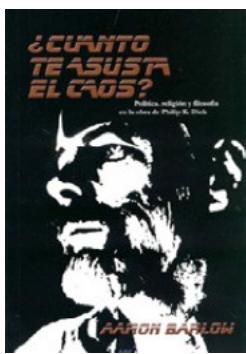
doubt I ever would have returned even to adjunct teaching. I would never have realized how much I *like* teaching and would never have jumped into it full time when the possibility arose.

At the time that I was beginning to “adjunct” once more, I fell into a bit of good luck. A British scholar, Will Brooker, planning a volume on the movie *Blade Runner*, saw a chapter of my dissertation in a much earlier book on the film. He contacted me and asked if I would like to contribute to the new book also. I decided that I would even though I was more than a decade out of the academic loop.

At the same time, though I didn’t know it, my dissertation was being translated into Spanish and published in Madrid.

When I finally found out about that, the idea of an academic career no longer seemed as farfetched as it once had. With publications appearing, even if one of them was somewhat odd, perhaps, if I could prove myself as a teacher, there might be more than contingent academic jobs in my future.

In the late nineties, when my store was doing its best, I had offered my dissertation to a website dedicated to its subject. We posted it as a series of essays; I realized that I was giving my work away, but I had written it to be read and, this way, it might be.



It was. A few years later, I got a request from someone in Spain, asking to translate one of the chapters and publish it in a journal there. My OK, apparently, was seen as permission to translate the whole thing—once the journal article had appeared—and publish it as a book. I didn't know about it until it was going into its second printing. When I starting going on interviews for academic jobs, I would take the book with me—but more as a curiosity than as a sample of academic success. Frankly, I didn't know what to make of it. Of course I hoped it would help, but I am not sure I ever showed it in an interview.

Before settling into academia, I had some forty jobs. I've lived in eleven states (six of them two or more times) and three countries outside of the U.S. This serves me particularly well, I think, at the diverse and international New York City College of Technology, the City University of New York campus where I teach. Many of those jobs I had were of the sort my students have now—and many of them are as well-travelled as I. As we get to know each other, they tell me something about their lives and I tell them a little of mine. We learn to communicate with each other and they, I hope, start learning to do it through writing.

Blogographia I¹

ACADEMIC BLOGGING AS A CAREER MOVE

7/3/12 - It's a bit difficult for me, who has only been a full-time academic for eight years, to give advice without blushing. But I have sat on my department's Appointments Committee for three years, now, and I have learned a thing or two... or hope I have.

When I finally took a full-time teaching job in 2004, the relationship between the internet and academic pursuits—scholarly pursuits in particular—was not yet clear. People wondered if blogging would help or hinder one's career, if being too public would somehow demean one's standing as a scholar. An internet search uncovering a penchant for blogging could, some worried, be the death knell of a job quest.

That wasn't really the case, though many certainly believed it was. Blogging, if anything, has helped my own career—and I know it has done the same for others. Not only has it helped me improve my writing skills, but it has introduced me to a wide variety of scholars (one does not blog without reading blogs), to people whose work I might never have otherwise encountered but also to first-rank academics like Michael Bérubé, who is now president of the Modern Language Association (MLA).

Blogging also introduced my work to others, and has led to inclusion of essays I have written as chapters in a number of different books—and, of course, it led to three of my own books. It has led me to

NOTE

1. The "Blogographia" entries all come from either [One Flew East](#) or the [Academe Blog](#). They have been lightly edited for inclusion here.

learn much more about my profession, bringing me into conflict with the likes of David Horowitz, an extremely smart (though wrong-headed) man who has forced me to look more carefully at academia and to hone my own rhetorical skills.

Through blogging, also, I have come to understand the importance of the public intellectual, the scholar who moves beyond university walls and enters into the discourse of the public sphere. This is something that had started to die out in recent years as some scholars began to feel that only discussion among specialists was fruitful. Many scholars began to fear that their work would be looked down upon, were it too “popular.” The blogs, I hope, have been dispelling that, especially as more and more top scholars turn to blogging as a means of extending contact.

Recently, the MLA, one of the most august organizations within the humanities, [revised](#) its stand on copyright, in part because of the growing importance of blogging:

Rosemary G. Feal, executive director of the MLA,... said, “we see that publishing needs are changing, and our members are telling us that they want to place their scholarship in repositories, and to disseminate work on blogs.” Professors want to produce articles that “circulate freely,” she said, and that reach as many people as possible.

Other publishers of academic journals and blogs will likely follow suit, making academic blogs an even more important part of professional life.

What sparked this post was discovery of a blog from Australia called “historypunk” through a post, “[Developing your personal digital marketing strategy: A guide for academics](#).” Jo Hawkins, the

blog “owner,” is a graduate student finishing her doctorate. Hawkins, assuming the value of blogging rather than defending it, provides a 5-step “digital marketing strategy” on the assumption that blogging is not only going to help with research and writing but will be a major part of any successful academic job search in the near future.

I think she’s right. Already, when we are sifting through CVs, I will look online to see what interesting candidates are doing beyond the traditional categories of their applications. I can’t say that doing so has influenced my votes so far, but I can imagine it doing so in the near future.

From a place with a slight smell of disrepute and a somewhat outsider status just eight years ago, blogs certainly have come a long way. We all know that. I merely point out the obvious because there is still a long path ahead before blogs (and all of the other online tools) become central to all of our explorations, be they on new topics for research and writing or for new positions within our colleges and universities. Already, they are piercing the walls between academia and the broader public and are making once rarefied discussions open to more people. Together, blogs, wikis, and ‘social media’ have created a new academic public sphere.

It will only get stronger over the next few years.

In fact, I can see a day when a job candidate without a blog is looked on with a bit of suspicion and when students, rather than turning to ratemyprofessor.com to decide on a class, look to their teachers’ blogs....

Three years later, I'm not so copacetic about blogging—or about social media. We've created a stew but are not sure if the ingredients go well together. However, we've already started serving it up, slopping it on top of the plateful already dished out. Whether blogs will continue to be a major part of the taste is something yet to be determined.

We never really know how media will configure themselves (thank you, Marshall McLuhan), but we can be sure that it won't be in the ways we've expected.

Subjectivity

We Americans have taken subjectivity and individualism to an extreme, creating a strange sort of relativity that isn't even relative. To us, our personal subjectivity is divine, its valor and value confirmed, today, by our individual online universes, each one putting each of us at the center: "You're the one that can do what's never been done / that can win what's never been won," sang Bob Dylan back when advertising was reaching its apogee. Yet, "Meanwhile life outside goes on all around you."

Who worries about *that*?

Social media have taken the feverish advertising environment of the sixties, one that we looked at suspiciously at the time, and have made it our individual mania/mantra, obliterating almost everything else. Today, we embrace advertising even as art. And the mass of it, thanks to our personal details as harvested by the Internet, becomes individual.

The subjectivity I see as so important in both journalism and education has, in many areas, flown off the rails, airborne and uncontrolled when it should still be connected to some sort of cultural track. This makes me nervous.

To mean anything beyond my little life, my subjectivity needs to interact with yours (the key to both successful teaching and good journalism and, perhaps, the key to life), but we're moving into a universe where it needn't—and this may prove to be our unfolding national disaster.

Printing the Word

In 1980, when I started really focusing on graduate school, I took a part-time job as editor of a twelve-page tabloid called *Free Environment Monthly*. With a staff of volunteers, we put out a paper dedicated to environmental issues in Johnson County, Iowa. With the new director of the activist environmentalist organization Free Environment, Pat Stoll, I remade the paper, changing the name to *Chinook Winds*, redesigning it, and adding a lot more local copy. I had never before been an editor and my grasp of the rules of grammar was, quite frankly, rather shaky. I knew what sounded right, but I rarely knew why. In all other aspects of the paper, too, I was flying by the seat of my pants—learning by doing.

I loved it. I typed the majority of our stories on an IBM Selectric II, laid out each page on blue-lined sheets on a light table, and created the headlines using ChartPak sheets. As our readers were primarily local, I quite quickly got taken to task each issue for what I'd done wrong. I began to learn the value of audience as a means of improving what I was doing.

And I was doing quite a bit wrong. I learned soon that even the best story is only part of the whole, that the interaction between writer and audience carrying the story is just as important. The page itself, I was discovering, is no more than a conveyance, though one that manages to transport meanings well beyond those of the words lying on it.

This was something of a revelation to me, who had been focusing on print on paper since the age of eleven, when I first set a line in type. In high school, I found an old mimeograph machine, refurbished it, and printed up what I styled an "underground newspaper." It wasn't much good, but it did cause a bit of a splash in the local community, which had never seen anything like it. It was 1969, but the little town of Clinton near Utica, New York, was still living in the fifties.

Over the next few years, I typeset and printed up a number of staple-bound chapbooks of poetry on a clamshell press I managed to gain access to. Later, while working for a small boarding school, I taught Graphic Arts, sticking mainly to an old proof press I'd picked up, using that for safety's sake.

As attuned as I was to vanishing technologies in the printing field, I was also beginning to become interested in the emerging digital possibilities for “word processing,” a new phrase popping up here and there, and with more and more frequency. I knew that the old-style printing I had grown to love was doomed. I was also beginning to see that changes were also in store for journalism; even the local-advocacy journalism I was involved with through Free Environment would soon be quite different—though I had no idea how. I was watching through the eighties as reporting became sloppier and sloppier—and more and more entertaining. But I had no clue what any of it meant or why it was happening.

I was watching during much of the eighties from Africa, where my only contact with journalists was with the few who ventured for a few minutes from the fancy hotels in their chauffeured and air-conditioned cars with bottled water and hampers of prepared food. The reporters I saw were living in a bubble—and were carrying it with them.

Sitting at a table of a street-side café on Wenceslas Square in Prague in the summer of 1992, I watched a small group of protesters hand out leaflets at the base of the statue of Saint Wenceslas on a horse. I had a little shortwave radio, a holdover from my Peace Corps days in Africa, where I had become an addict to the BBC. It was now, like then, tuned to the news. Czechoslovakia was falling apart, and I wanted to hear about it in a language I could understand. I felt I needed to: my plans would soon take me to Brno and then to Bratislava, which might be in another country by the time I got there.

It was happening as I listened, the BBC on my radio said. And who could I trust if not the Beeb? There were suddenly two countries where one had been before. One would be called the “Czech Republic” and the other “Slovakia.” A correspondent on the scene in Prague breathlessly reported live on rioting in Wenceslas Square. I didn’t see any, but then Wenceslas Square isn’t really a square, either. It’s a long rectangle, but why quibble?

It had been a decade since I’d been involved in the news business, so who was I to care if a journalist enhanced a story? Journalism, to my eye, had long been self-destructing. So, what’s new? What’s news?

I travelled through the nascent country of Slovakia twice during the following week,

first en route to Budapest in Hungary and then while travelling north from Budapest to Krakow in Poland. At all points, security was doubled—not from need but because the old Czechoslovakian officials were still in place along with the new Slovakian ones. It was all a bit amusing. Without any overt signs of recognition of the other, each side jockeyed for primacy.

Each wanted to create the illusion that the other wasn't there.

What illusions and deliberate self-deceptions might I also be perpetuating when I participate in acts of journalism or strut about in my "official" role as a teacher?

Blogographia II

ARE WE ALL A LITTLE BIT BILL O'REILLY?

2/24/15 - In November of 1990, I was in Togo's capital city, Lomé, finishing up the paperwork for the close of my Peace Corps service. A friend and I, as we usually did in the morning when we were in the city, had found a street stand serving coffee, bread and eggs to people who would eat them while sitting on a low, wooden bench at the side of the road. It was a wide dirt street running from Kodjoviakopé (where the Peace Corps office was) to the central market.

As we drank our coffee, people suddenly appeared, running toward the marketplace. We were tired from a long trip down from the north (where we were stationed) the day before, so paid a lot less attention than we might have. Something of interest was happening, but we would hear about it soon enough, we figured. No one else on the bench got up to run, so we figured we were fine right where we were.

A few minutes later, we saw a plume of black smoke spurt into the sky above the marketplace and heard a series of booms. Quickly, people were running back in the opposite direction they had been running before. I seem to remember that some of them were bloody or had torn

clothes, but that may just be the imagining of intervening years.

We heard later—I think—that a number of people had been killed. Six, if my memory serves me right.

It may be wrong, however, as wrong as Bill O'Reilly's memories of a riot he had witnessed in Argentina a few years earlier. As wrong as at least some versions I've heard of a party at my grandparents' house in the late 1940s. As wrong as most of the stories we've heard on bar stools, over Thanksgiving turkeys and from that person in the next seat on a long, cross-country flight.

So, what's the difference? After all, Bill O'Reilly isn't in a position where people should be trusting him, like Brian Williams was, where confidence is a necessary part of the job. O'Reilly is a "news clown" of the sort presaged (and named) by Philip K. Dick in his story "Top Stand-By Job" in *Amazing Stories* in October of 1963: Dick's Jim Briskin's shows include things such as "his quaint account—it had touched the hearts of millions—of the mutant blue jay which learned, by great trial and effort, to sew." Like Briskin, no matter how much he blusters, O'Reilly is nothing more than an entertainer. And it is stories that entertain us, truth completely to the side. That people fool themselves into feeling differently shouldn't be his fault, should it?

Here's the problem, and it's demonstrated in the PKD story: News clowns are just too close to politics and to real journalism where the quest for truth, not fame or power, should be central. They become just too close to places where honesty, and not entertainment, should be the touchstone.

Briskin sees a chance to become president and decides to try, but does not succeed.

The story ends with this:

"Look, Jim-Jam Briskin's back on the air," Leon said, gesturing at the TV set. Sure enough, there was the famous, familiar red wig, and Briskin was saying something witty and yet profound, something that made one stop to ponder. "Hey listen," Leon said. "He's poking fun at the FBI, can you imagine him doing that now? He's not scared of anything."

Don't bother me," Max said. "I'm thinking." He reached over and carefully turned the sound of the TV set off.

For thoughts such as he was having he wanted no distractions.

A distraction is all that O'Reilly is, too—and that's the problem, for he claims to be something more. Yet he continues to clown, [making threats](#) against a reporter: "During a phone conversation, he told a reporter for *The New York Times* that there would be repercussions if he felt any of the reporter's coverage was inappropriate. 'I am coming after you with everything I have,' Mr. O'Reilly said. 'You can take it as a threat.'"

This is nonsense; this is just plain silly.

If I, or your Aunt Thelma, exaggerate a story (unconsciously or not) and are caught out, we are simply embarrassed, apologize and move on, wondering about our memories and whether or not we are losing our minds. When Williams does it, he really must step aside. We've a culture of trust that has developed surrounding our legitimate news anchors and legitimate journalistic endeavors and outlets (for all of Sarah Palin's "lame-stream media" comments, there are still reasons to trust much of American journalism). The problem for O'Reilly is that, even though he is not a legitimate news anchor or even commentator or journalist of any sort, he plays one on TV, and on a network that, as a whole, masquerades entertainment as news. So, he's in a bind much greater than Williams faced: He cannot admit to having lied or

exaggerated, for that would be putting the lie to the entire Fox News charade. So, he has to fight back; he *has* to.

And that is why none of the rest of us is Bill O'Reilly—unless our lies, too, have been used to fool people in a harmful way, to defraud them or to advance our own careers.

Boots on the Ground

Somehow, around 1978, I'd gotten hold of a pair of firefighter boots. They weren't much use in the wintertime, too much cold metal around the feet. But they proved perfect for morning chores in the farrowing barn on weekends. The students on the crew only had green-and-yellow rubber wellies, so I had the pleasure of confidently leading in where the shit was deepest.

Once you get used to it, the smell of pig manure is almost sweet, like the corn their feed is made from. No one much cares for it, though. There was a room in the basement of the boys' dorm dedicated to cleaning up after work in the barn. I kept my boots there, and work clothes, bringing down clean day clothes before going out so that they'd be right at hand once I'd stuffed the work clothes into a plastic bag and showered.

Scattergood Friends School was a great place for learning to teach, and I wish I could have concentrated on that alone. But I was also working at a car dealership detailing trade-ins and taking a class a semester at the local university—and drinking way too much. All of these, I thought at the time, were as important as the teaching. The director of the school once complained about the number of beer cans in my trash, and he was right, though I could not see it at the time. Two years there destroyed my marriage, but I did love what I was doing—when I wasn't making a mess of things.

Blogographia III

JUST THE FACTS, MA'AM

4/28/06 - Years ago, when I was teaching Psychology at a boarding school, I had my students go out into the main circle and count the birds that flew over during a 15-minute period (it was part of a statistics and scientific-method section). They all came back, of course, with different counts, but each one felt that he or she had the "facts." I let them argue for a while, then started asking questions. "What constituted 'flying over'?" "How do you know you didn't miss some because of where you were standing or where you were looking?" "Does a bird in one of the trees fluttering from one branch to another count?"

Soon, they got the picture: a fact isn't a fact simply because of one person's observations or discoveries. A fact is established through repeated confirmation and agreement....

There were grand moments at Scattergood, like the morning I played Bob Dylan's "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest" on a little record player at breakfast during some sort of campus crisis. I don't remember what the crisis was, but it had made me think of the song's last lines, the ones about the "little neighbor boy who carried him [Frankie Lee] to rest" and who said, "nothing is revealed." When the music stopped, there wasn't a sound.

Everyone worked, and together. That was a Quaker school tradition, one I had learned earlier at another small boarding school, that time as a student. We washed dishes together, cooked and swept together, built buildings together, raised chickens and hogs together.

It didn't always work that way, of course. Much later, I spent an unfruitful year as a teacher/administrator for a Quaker day school. When I suggested an egalitarian work day to the board, the convener—a physician—turned it down point blank: "I do not clean toilets," she said.

I do.

And that's often what teaching is about.

I learned that at those other Quaker schools: Scattergood in Iowa and the Arthur Morgan School in the mountains of North Carolina. And, though I am no longer a Quaker, I haven't forgotten. I haven't forgotten the little things that teach the most.

Blogographia IV

BELOVED COUNTRY: A MEMORY

7/14/11 - How I got back to school after the break is lost in my own fog.

Perhaps my parents drove me up from Atlanta, where we then lived.

Perhaps, as sometimes happened, they put me on the bus, to be picked up in Asheville.

For the winter, we were moved to a cabin about a mile from the school, a place optimistically named "Walden," its builder having first planned on constructing everything himself and being completely self-sufficient. He only completed part, then brought in help. Even then, the place had never been quite finished. There was a sink, for example, but no water. The little pump out at the spring had never been completely installed and, in the years the house had sat empty, had been vandalized to nothing. I loved that spring from the start and can still remember it clearly, the shiny, chilly water pooling before sliding over the rocks to start a small brook. I particularly remember the joy of disturbing the surface with a ladle.

For some reason, my memory places the outhouse slightly uphill from the spring, but I know that's not possible. No one would have placed it there, not even the optimist who had begun the house.

Our heat was a fireplace and a small pot-bellied stove. There were

two bedrooms for the four of us (a new student teacher, this one named Pat Nash, had joined us). Generally, one person slept in the main room. That one had the responsibility, on cold winter mornings (and it can get cold up there in the mountains, especially when snow covers the ground), of jumping out of bed and lighting the prepared fires in stove and fireplace before diving quickly back under the covers until the room had warmed. Once that had occurred, the others of us would shiver in from the bedrooms to dress where we wouldn't freeze.

We spent a great deal of our time cutting wood. Years later, I realized just how much I had learned about saws when, asked to take one side of a cross-cut, I outlasted three teenagers on the other. I had fallen back into the pattern learned early of letting the saw do most of the work, never pressing or pushing, pulling smoothly and gently.

We generally hauled our wood up on a small trailer attached to an army-surplus 1943 Willy's jeep nicknamed 'the holey heap.' Not much else could make it up there. We had to walk to school, so rarely returned to the cabin before nightfall. At school, we could shower and eat before classes—and participate in chores, including cooking and taking care of the animals. Though there were cows among the AMS community, and I sometimes helped care for them (though generally I was relegated to the chickens), we students weren't allowed to drink the milk, but had to be happy with that coming in little half-pint cartons.

One day in the spring, Pat drove the three of us over to Eastern Tennessee (not far, really) to visit a family he knew who were building their own house. They were a little more structured and able than I suspect the man who had started our Walden was, building out of logs they cut themselves and had planed with an adz. To get there, we had to head down into their hollow via a series of switchbacks on a

narrow dirt road, making the trip a lot longer than one might otherwise imagine, for the turns were steep and almost 180 degrees, and sometimes the edge of the road had crumbled a bit. We were used to similar roads, but this, in my memory, was the steepest I'd seen.

A number of lean-tos and sheds dotted the area around the house. I believe the roof was already on, but I don't think the family had moved in yet—I think they were living in an old school bus parked on the property, but my memory on that is fuzzy.

Pat chatted with his friends and we scouted the area. Uphill from the house, a couple of men (we had parked beside their pickup) were coiling long black rubber hoses they had dug up. The hoses originated in an area where the trees were covered with white stuff. There had clearly been an explosion and a fire; the structure there had been completely demolished, as little now left as there had been of our first house after our own fire, the one that necessitated our move to Walden.

This one, we were told later, had been no accident. The two men were moonshiners salvaging what they could, for the revenuers had been there the day before, had chopped the still to pieces and then had blown up the remnants.

We had all seen stills before, but generally gave them a wide berth. Operating ones were valuable, and their owners could get a little touchy when people got too nosey. This one, though, was gone, so no one really cared. The two men were likely known to the authorities anyway, and were now doing nothing illegal, so they didn't mind us wandering around where, two days before, we'd have been highly unwelcome.

On the last day of the term, as I prepared to go back to Atlanta

where my family was packing up to move once again (the fate, it seems, of many of the Appalachian diaspora), Pat handed me a book. He must have seen my fascination with another Antioch student, the roommate of Lee Morgan, the son of the couple, Ernest and Elizabeth Morgan, who ran the school (named after Ernest's [father](#)). That student was a young Kenyan named Alphonse Okuku, and it is he who had first interested me in Africa.

The book Pat gave me was Alan Paton's [*Cry the Beloved Country*](#).

Both Alphonse and that book are mentioned in the Introduction to the book I edited that came out this year, [*One Hand Does Not Catch a Buffalo*](#). Africa eventually became as important to me as Appalachia, and both remain in my heart.

I doubt Pat remembers me at all. Alphonse didn't. Still, when I contacted him from Togo, he invited me to visit him in Kisumu, Kenya, where I crossed the continent at the end of my Peace Corps service. He remembered the school, of course, and was still in touch with Lee. He proved the best host possible, taking me and my companion from Kisumu to Homa Bay and then Rusinga Island, his ancestral home and the site of a memorial to his brother, a Kenyan leader at the time of independence who was assassinated in 1969.

Like his brother, Alphonse was a politician. A week or so after he changed political alliances a year or two after my visit, he died in an auto accident.

At least, it was *called* an accident.

My Money Where My Mouth Was

After the dot-com bubble burst around 2000, as I've said, my Brooklyn store did not do



very well. Too many in the neighborhood had hitched their wagons to the shooting stars of the then-nebulous Internet. My place was called "Shakespeare's Sister," after Virginia Woolf's brilliant little story in "A Room of One's Own." I believed strongly, still do, that there's a bit of genius in everyone. We're all artists, all creative. Parts of what made

running Shakespeare's Sister worthwhile were the local crafts we sold, from greeting cards on up, the art in our gallery space, the music, the drama, the poetry. We weren't just a store but a place, I imagined, for trying out one's own possibilities. But, as Woolf also wrote, that takes money—and there was now a lot less of it around.

Blogographia V

EXPANDING UPON IT!

7/1/07 - Last week, I co-taught a professional-development course for high-school teachers, "Classroom Blogs and Citizen Journalism," at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. My colleague and I introduced the teachers to blogging software, but little of what we did, really, had much to do with technology.

Why?

As a culture, we've reached the point in our communications revolution where it's no longer the hardware or even the programs that need our concentrated attention. For the moment, the technological changes occurring (the iPhone concept antiquating the laptop, for example) are almost predictable. Even developments such as YouTube startled only those who had not been paying attention. Most everyone else simply said "cool" and started watching and linking.

The cultural changes resulting from this revolution, however, continue to blindside us. In educational situations, they come close to causing paralysis.

Which was the subtext of the week.

To many within our academic institutions, the scariest part of all this is the destruction of the protective barriers we've built around our schools and colleges, barriers designed to define and limit responsibility, but whose effect has also been to cut educational institutions from the broader world. What Brad DeLong [extols](#) as "an invisible college, of more people to talk to, pointing me to more interesting things" frightens the pants off of many of our educators (particularly education administrators) for it reduces control but does nothing about responsibility.

As a result, even more schools are turning to proprietary systems for dealing with the Web. Unfortunately, all of these, including the nearly ubiquitous Blackboard, miss DeLong's point. Rather than expanding, they limit, narrowing the lessons it is possible to teach today about utilizing the Web in relative safety.

What we were trying to teach our students were alternatives to the blocking of websites and other means of keeping students from a Web they are going to encounter anyway. We wanted to encourage

the teachers to find ways of making their students “neterate,” able to negotiate the Web productively and in safety. Doing so, of course, would also require teaching parents, colleagues, and administrators—at least to the point where they were confident the students (or the schools) weren’t being led into danger. Ethics, for example, was a major subject for the week, as were ownership, responsibility, and much more.

As the week progressed, it became clear that we were advising our teacher-students to follow DeLong and fight to expand their universes of instruction, a problem when many educational institutions are operating in a climate of fear generated by, among other things, the likes of David Horowitz—people who want to see our schools curtailed and who can succeed through simply posing their threats. Among other things, Horowitz wants to force teachers to stick to the subject matter defined for their courses, no more and no less. Never having been a teacher, he doesn’t understand that the learning mind doesn’t work that way, that compartmentalization hobbles learning.

Our teacher-students didn’t mind: We started with technology, showing them a little about html and walking them through Blogger’s possibilities. But they proved more interested in exploring just what the Web can offer and how they could utilize it, given the restrictions that would surely be imposed upon them, no matter how eloquently they argued for their projects. As that’s where we wanted to go, the week worked out well....

Business was down—we’re back to the career change—and I needed extra income. A couple of customers suggested places where I might teach part time, something I hadn’t done in years and hadn’t thought about doing. They knew I had a PhD. So I stopped by Pratt

Institute and dropped off the CV I'd concocted the night before and, later, once the Fall 2001 semester was starting and on the advice of an acquaintance, stopped in at New York City College of Technology, the City University of New York school close to where my store was. Pratt had already offered me a section but, I figured, what the heck, why not try for two?

I sat down with the chair. He asked where I'd earned my master's. I said my PhD was from the University of Iowa. He said, "Can you start tomorrow?"

Blogographia VI

HARNESSING COMMUNICATION

9/20/06 - Looking around my classrooms this fall before the official hour, I'm struck by how many more students than ever before are peering down at their desks, reading—screens, to be sure, but reading, and reading diligently. Some are staring at Sidekicks, using their thumbs to respond to what they are reading, typing even more quickly than the stereotyped two-finger-typing reporter in a 1940s movie. Some have laptops—one holds an even smaller computer running the Linux she has fallen in love with.

In my Advanced Technical Writing class in a computer lab, the students—the very first day—slid before their screens and started communicating (and no, they weren't playing games). Many of them had set up their blogs (the first assignment) and had posted on them by the end of that first class. Even in my Developmental Writing class, computers show up unbidden. One student does the in-class writings on his and emails them to me during class (I keep a laptop with me, too).

"Something is happening here," as Dylan long ago wrote, "and you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?" Students are *writing*. And

on their own.

And many of us supposed teachers of writing aren't even paying attention. We're stuck in the 1980s and early 1990s and with the assignments and methodologies of *that* time. Just as Dylan's Mr. Jones was facing a world he could not negotiate, we are failing to negotiate a universe of the written word that is fast shifting away from the one we were raised in.

Some of us even justify our inaction in the face of a changing technological world of writing by pointing to a "digital divide," saying that only the lucky students, the ones with money and from good high schools, are able to take advantage of the new possibilities. They ought to visit my campus, no elite university, where even the kids from the worst inner-city neighborhoods are comfortable with technology in a way their older siblings cannot grasp (let alone the teacher whose cell phone is simply that—a phone). Text messaging, instant messaging and email are facts of life to almost every college student entering this fall, no matter their backgrounds.

This resurgence of writing on the users' own terms (certainly not on those of writing teachers) is not an example of "technodeterminism," however, with the technology responsible for a cultural change by itself. No. What we are seeing is a result of the human desire to communicate, and to do so through any avenue that is both available and effective.

And in that lies a rebuke to all of us who teach writing.

Students would have been writing with enthusiasm all along, *if they had seen it as a real means of engaging with the people they want to 'talk' to*. They always chatted—the teenager on the phone has been a cliché since the 1950s, at least. Now they are finding they can chat as easily through the written word, something we writing teachers never

managed to show them.

Too many writing teachers dismiss the writings their students compose through the new technologies, holding firmly to their old ideas of what writing should be, refusing to explore means of using what the students are doing in order to turn them into enthusiastic writers in the classroom as well as on the Sidekick. They use the shorthand of the net as an excuse rather than as an opening.

Worried that the students will write “u go grl” in a paper? Don’t dismiss it. Turn it into a discussion of code switching, making sure they understand the reasons for shifting from one mode into another (something they can and will do).

The possibilities for enhancing college writing through use of what the students are now doing on their own are myriad. It only takes a little imagination on the part of the teacher to begin bringing them to reality. IM and email exchanges can morph into competent college papers, give a little encouragement.

If students can be led to see the connection between the types of writing they use to communicate with each other and the types of writing they have to do in college classes, they may learn to stop dreading the college assignments so. Many of us have been teaching students to write to sheets of paper for decades, boring our students half to death (for they are managing only half a conversation—pieces of paper don’t write back). It’s time more of us starting teaching our students to write to communicate.

No, that’s not right: they are already writing to communicate on their own. They don’t need us for that. It’s time more of us started harnessing our students’ abilities in communication to the carts of college success.

So it was that I found myself teaching a developmental writing course for the first time in years, one meeting from 8:30 to 10:00 four days a week, I think it was, starting the last week of August, that year. 2001.

Put the location, dates and times together: You can see where this is headed. Where we were headed.

Some start to a renewed teaching career.

Anyway: I'd been told to tell students to keep their cell phones off. I did so; this hadn't been a concern last time I'd taught; I bowed to contemporary wisdom.

One day, we heard sirens, not uncommon. But lots of them. Out the window, we could see Flatbush at the end of the Manhattan Bridge. Fire trucks there started multiplying.

It was soon break time.

Students turned on their phones; they beeped. I still have nightmares that a family member was trying to reach out from one of the towers. Today, I work with devices in the classroom, not against them.



One of the students shouted,
"A plane hit the World Trade Center."
I imagined a Piper Cub. "Two planes."
"They're on fire."

I didn't know what this meant or
what to do. My classroom castle had
evaporated.

Two students, National Guard, asked
if they could leave, to go down there,
assuming they would be called, realizing
there was an urgent need for them. I nodded, but they were already out the door. I cancelled
the rest of class but that didn't matter. The other students were leaving too, ignoring me.

As I knew no one at the college and had no office to go to, I also left.

Blogographia VII

IN MEMORIAM

9/11/01 - As I walked from teaching in Brooklyn Heights this morning, someone said that one of the World Trade Center towers had collapsed. We had heard the sirens in class; a couple of students discovered through their cell phones that planes had hit the towers, so I knew that a tragedy was in progress. But I refused to believe that either of the towers could collapse.

I walked to the promenade over the East River where it joins the Hudson, where one normally sees a magnificent panorama centering on lower Manhattan. I wanted to prove to myself that both towers still stood.

Others were doing the same. All silent. No one walking fast.

As I walked down Remsen Street, I could see the water but, half a mile over it, the view was obliterated by smoke. Smoke filled with sparkles, like house lights through a fog.

From the promenade, I found all of lower Manhattan obscured. Nothing could be seen but the smoke—and its little sparkles.

The smoke, the sparkles, were heading our way, slowly spreading over the water. Unable to see anything, finally aware of the immensity of the tragedy, I turned to walk to Shakespeare's Sister.

The smoke caught me, swept around me, leaving bits of particulate in my nose and throat.

I thought, then, about the sparkles I had seen over the water. Maybe they were bits of asbestos, as one person suggested. Maybe bits of metal from the explosions reflecting the sunlight. Or the bits of paper that soon showered down on us. I don't know.

To me, they were also something more. They were the spirits of the lives snuffed out, sparkling one last goodbye.

Walking back down Remsen Street back to Court Street, I saw a woman with a toddler and a baby rushing to the promenade. A man warned her to turn around, that more smoke was coming. "I want them to see this," said she, and continued on. Little bits of charred paper swirled all about.

Surreal.

A World of Books

Where was I?

Oh, teaching. Not something, I was discovering, one can do at a remove from the world. Or can remove from the world.

Anyway, unlike most people who do it, I suppose, I didn't go to grad school to be a professor. In Chicago in 1977, absolutely miserable (and generally drunk), working for an import house doing inventory control and domestic purchasing, and then in an auto-parts department and selling cars by night, I started reading something besides science fiction and mysteries. Balzac. *Père Goriot* struck a chord. Faulkner. I was mesmerized by *The Hamlet*.

For the first time, I wanted more than the books themselves. *Where the hell had these things come from?* Undergraduate, I'd been a philosophy major, though I had taken a number of English courses. What I hadn't done was study literature with any sort of plan. I'd read much of Shakespeare, but on my own and randomly. Milton was alien and Chaucer almost unheard of. I'd picked up Sterne almost by accident. It was like that.

Pynchon, of contemporary writers, was my favorite, though I'd not yet managed to get through *Gravity's Rainbow*.

It was Faulkner, though, who made me realize I didn't have a clue what I was reading. And I wanted at least one clue. Desperately.

So, when my new wife and I got a combined full-time job (they really wanted just her, but I was the Quaker) at Scattergood, I enrolled in an evening graduate class at the

University of Iowa nearby. It was on eighteenth-century Gothic literature. I didn't have any idea what that was, but the time was convenient. I'd also never heard of the MLA, let alone its (required) style sheet. To make matters worse, I had taken a part-time job at Autohaus, a VW dealership that supplied me with blue uniforms with my name on the pocket. I would teach at Scattergood in the morning and complete faculty duties on the weekend, going into Iowa City to Autohaus in the afternoon and then, two late afternoons, attending my class—in my work uniform, sometimes with a red rag forgotten in my back pocket and always with grease under my nails.

There was one grad student who would lean back in his chair and talk as an equal with the professor, David Morris, about "Monk" Lewis and other people I'd never heard of. I was completely out of my league. It would stay that way through most of my coursework. Through most of my graduate career, for that matter.

I hadn't sense enough to enroll in courses I knew something about. Or to take on projects the outcomes of which were foregone conclusions.

Though, as I've said, I'd read Shakespeare, I'd never studied him, so I took the graduate survey as a summer course the next year, right before—glug—Milton. Nine o'clock and ten o'clock, four days a week. I think I even took Chaucer, later in the day, that same summer. I had decided to try to get into the MA program in literature, so I wanted to get to know a few more professors and get some better grades. I had two "B"s from the two courses during the year: the Gothic one and then "Bibliography and Research Method." I suspect I learned more than any other student in either class, but I was starting way behind. I didn't care much about grades, though, as long as they were high enough to keep me in school.

In Shakespeare, I discovered I knew something, at least, and that propelled me into the Milton class, where no one knew much anyway: even Miltonists, I would soon find out, get lost in Milton. Chaucer, somehow, just *fit*. I couldn't read the language out loud very well, but read it I could. I was taking the three classes to get in some of the basics I felt I would need in this new personal program of learning to *read*, to read with context and history in

hand. I earned "A"s in each summer class, proving I could compete in lower-level graduate classes, at least. I'd never done that well in any term at any school before.

That fall, when I did get into a graduate program at Iowa, I suspected there had been some mistake. I was in the PhD program, not the MA one I thought I had applied for. I didn't think I wanted a doctorate, but that was OK, so I didn't bother to question the decision. I could always leave with the master's. Anyway, being a doctoral student would allow me to take more courses and, as I said, *read*.

I'd always liked reading, and always had done it ... even though I had hated every school I'd attended—except Arthur Morgan School, where I was pretty much left alone, and Beloit, where I'd transferred after my first three semesters of college. Oh, and Iowa. I was loving graduate school.

Blogographia VIII
ON BEING LEFT BEHIND

3/5/05 - Sometimes, the legacy of the New Critics gets the best of me and I end up getting carried away with something like a close reading. That's happened today with No Child Left Behind and the "left behind" books.

First, I have a sneaky suspicion that being "left behind" might not be such a bad thing. I guess that goes back to my own education.

Return with me, if you will, to a basement in a town in Michigan, circa 1967: a group of kids (including me) sitting around a turntable, listening (for the umpteenth time) to Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention's album *Freak Out*, singing under our breath to the lyrics of "Hungry Freaks, Daddy" with its rejection of "the great Midwestern hardware store/philosophy that turns away/from those who aren't afraid to say what's on their minds/the left behinds of the Great Society."

Even then, I wanted to be a “left behind.” I hated my school, and I did not do well there. Nor had I in the one before, nor did I in the one after that. I wanted out; I did not want to go in the direction “they” wanted to take me.

And I was not alone.

Today, the juggernaut I wanted to escape from goes on, but now its sights are set on heaven, not simply the Great Society here in this world (though many feel that is their earthly reward for the constancy of their belief). Now, they have exchanged the idea that we “non-believers” (of whatever sort—then it was simply belief in the rewards of material gain) will be left behind in the quest for material goods for a grander vision, one that includes those goods and heaven too! And, now, they have made my position even clearer. In the sixties, I wanted to be left behind. Now, “they” are telling me I will be left behind—and are telling me so with pride.

Used now in that series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, the phrase “left behind” carries with it a feeling (one that Frank Zappa was using ironically) that anyone with any sense wants to be on the train, the car, the boat, the plane, or—yes—the bus (Ken Kesey: even you were a bit elitist with your “Are you on the bus or off the bus?”). It does not leave room for the millions of us who never wanted to go in that direction; it assumes that everyone should (at least). There’s a smugness in the phrase that I find distasteful at the very least.

Deep down, there’s also that coupling of “left” with “behind.” It’s the left that is standing in the station (in this view) while the train to glory pulls out. This one is certainly implicit in No Child Left Behind. The sense is that “we” can do better, with our reliance on standards and testing, than did those leftists who so long controlled our schools

(uh, not!). Clear-eyed conservative guidance can undo the damage those fuzzy liberals have caused: that's the implication of "no child left behind." (Thing is, it really doesn't consider the children or learning—but that's another topic).

What I didn't know was that doctoral programs in English are designed to make one hate reading.

Preparing for my comprehensive exams, my lack of background in literature caught up with me once again. Of the 300 or so books on my reading lists, I was really familiar with about fifty. So, I would get up in the morning and sit in a cold tub. Four in the morning, with shriveled fingers turning pages. By that time, I guess, I wanted that PhD. You have to: without real desire, no one finishes. I used to imagine myself as one of those wan ABDs on the fringes of campus, teaching an occasional course, working in a bookstore, writing just enough something-or-other to keep up appearances.

African Interlude

Brooks Landon, who had agreed to guide me through my dissertation, tossed my first feeble attempt at a prospectus back at me. He laughed, rightly so. We both knew it was pathetic, and he knew that I knew so didn't try to sugarcoat it. I decided, instead of continuing with my bullshit "theory" stuff—something about contingency—to pitch a study of a favorite writer of mine from high school, Philip K. Dick. To my surprise, I found that there would be enough interest in that science-fiction outlier among the faculty to form a committee with Brooks as chair. This was 1983 or so, and Dick was not yet worshiped.

Unfortunately, my interest, to the detriment of any further progress toward my degree,

was turning elsewhere. The girl I then loved had decamped for Peace Corps in Benin, in West Africa. In 1984, I visited. As a result, I lost a girlfriend but gained a continent. Regained, actually. I had been fascinated by Africa in junior high school—a result of meeting Alphonse, I guess. My interest had flagged, but it had never disappeared.

A year later, I was back south of the Sahara, teaching on a Fulbright grant at the University of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso.

“Senior Fulbright Lecturer.” It’s a lot less than it sounds. It was not too competitive, getting that placement; not many people want to go to the Sahel of West Africa, especially not to a landlocked, poverty-stricken country that had recently experienced a leftist coup d’état. I suspect I was the only one. Later, when a replacement for me couldn’t be found, I grabbed the chance to stay a second year.



After that, I returned temporarily to the States to wind things up at Iowa, desperate to get back to Africa. I pounded out a dissertation and rushed to Togo, this time as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Animal Traction—that is, plowing using oxen.

By a year into it, my drinking, already well out of hand, had evolved into a coming train wreck. The only way to unmix the metaphors was, I finally realized, just to stop. And so I did. That was in November of 1989.

Blogographia IX

WHY I TEACH

1/23/08 - When I was in Peace Corps, I taught farmers the rudiments of using oxen for plowing. I did this at an instruction center in the north of the West African nation of Togo. It was a complicated task: Aside from the actual plowing, the farmers had to learn to 1) use the tools needed for maintaining their plows and other equipment, 2) to house and care for large animals, and 3) how to grow and store appropriate feed. They also needed to learn rudimentary bookkeeping. They were entering into a monetary economy they had rarely experienced—they had to borrow from the government to buy the oxen, the equipment, fertilizer (no matter what you do, cotton is hard on the soil), and even pesticide. They would be embarking on cash-crop farming (as opposed to the primarily subsistence pattern of their past) to pay back the loan.

At first, I saw nothing wrong with this. After all, I was teaching them how to complete specific tasks, each one of which could be of value, especially as it became harder and harder to support a family through traditional farming methods (population growth, deforestation and desertification were ensuring that). The skills gained, I rationalized, would always stand the farmers in good stead.

By the time my second year started, though, I had withdrawn from all but minimal duties at the center, focusing instead on my secondary project, developing a tree nursery for hedgerows (a reforestation, soil preservation project).

Why? What was wrong with what I had been teaching the farmers?

Well, I had begun to feel I was teaching them into poverty, not out of it. And I did not like that.

The costs of the new ways of farming were so high that the

farmers were having to take land away from the crops that fed their families, meaning that they had to start buying food. Which meant that they had to plant even *more* cotton than they had before. It also meant that they were putting more stress on the land, unable to rotate crops appropriately or let their fields lie fallow every seventh year. And it placed them at the mercy of market forces well beyond their control. They may have had new skills, but they were facing a poverty that could prove more severe than anything they had previously experienced—a poverty that could (through their debt), eventually, remove them from the land completely. Remember that old Frank Norris [story](#), “A Deal in Wheat”? That’s where these farmers were heading.

What I was seeing brought home to me, more than anything else ever had, the fact that education needs to be more than simply skills acquisition if it is going to be truly effective as a means for moving people out of poverty. There has to be a cultural goal for the education, something that can benefit the entire village, city, or country.

If it is going to be a means for anything at all.

Also, skills, if not providing benefit for the individual locally, lead the skilled to leave. Just look at migratory patterns today. The very people whose skills seem most able to help their home communities are leaving. They are going to places where the value of their skills has already been established and evidenced through adequate compensation.

The only way I learned about the problems of Togolese farmers was through working with them, through teaching and watching, through talking and listening. I also learned that the only way to be of real help in the developing world is through following the lead of the people I am trying to aid, through then helping build a platform of local support for new skills. That hedgerow project? I started it because one

man in the village was already planting hedgerows. He and I talked over how to expand, and he suggested getting his grandsons involved, that I teach them how to handle seedlings.

The project cost very little and, when I returned five years later, the little nursery was still there, though the grandsons were using it for vegetables instead of trees. They had planted the trees, though, and were still doing hedgerows, too—though not so ambitiously. They had, however, gained skill in working with plants that they were continuing to use—and to make money from locally.

By listening rather than simply telling, rather than coming in with my own agenda, my own ideas, I had (at least) done no damage, and may even have accomplished just the littlest bit, allowing skills do develop within a milieu that could support those particular skills. A small step, yes. But it may allow those grandsons to stay in the area and continue to learn and develop rather than, as many of their contemporaries, wandering to the city from lack of opportunity at home.

Soon, not surprisingly, I found I was viewing teaching in a new way: Learn about your students and their environment, then use what you know about them to teach them—not just using the skills you have brought in, but also recognizing the place those skills can have in the community.

This, I liked.

Still, I didn't want to be a teacher anymore.

When I returned from Africa, I did teach for a bit, but neither high schools nor colleges held much attraction (and I tried both). I tried to transfer what I had learned to the American classroom, but I couldn't find enthusiasm for what I was doing.

I couldn't find a real role for me, outside of keeping order and

providing evaluation. What I wanted was for the students to take control of their own learning, the thing I had found the only effective way in Togo, leaving me to point them to the appropriate tools and the means for learning to use them.

But I found, back home, that doing that was *boring*, and I wanted to have fun. Besides, it only really worked for motivated students—just as development projects only work when the motivation precedes the aid worker.

So, I left teaching for most of a decade, only returning to it (and then just part time for the first three years) seven years ago.

When I entered the classroom again, something was different. Though I still wanted to facilitate what my students could do, I found I was trying to do this in ways I had never before considered. Without understanding why or how, I was attempting to motivate my students, not simply facilitate their learning.

Now, this is a task that would not have been appropriate in my role as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Effective (that is, lasting) motivation needs to come through those invested in the situation. It is something that needs to be done at home, and not for another culture.

As an American, I was (and am) upset by the direction of my country. I want to change that, and the only way I can successfully do so is by motivating others to join me in working to turn this Titanic around. This motivated me to do something other than I had before: Share, and not simply instruct. Share in a way I never could as an outsider in Africa.

That does not mean I now need to (or would want to) indoctrinate my students. Just the opposite.

Because I am invested in the idea of listening to my students and starting where they “are,” I don’t lay out a life course for them, but

I still do facilitate their learning rather than trying to control it. What I want to do today (and what I had not done before) is share with them the enthusiasm for learning, for exploration, for discovery, that I have developed over a lifetime of wandering and wondering. I want to imbue my students with the optimism I feel—the belief I share with Thoreau that the sun is a morning star, that the day is always unfolding. Then, enthused by possibility, they can take control of their own education, even turning their enthusiasm to personal gain.

And why do I do that?

I love the country I live in and the exploration I am making, and that leads me, like all enthusiasts, to want to share.

And that, ultimately, is why I teach.

Moving On

On completing my doctorate in 1988, however, I had no expectation of teaching. After defending my dissertation, I had some months to wait until my Peace Corps service would begin. I spent them in Brooklyn.

With nothing much to do (except drink), I took on temporary responsibility for the little Quaker cemetery in Prospect Park, taking care of the grounds, righting tombstones, and burying ashes (the full-body internments were handled by professional gravediggers). Among those whose ashes I buried was the mother of fifties movie star Montgomery Clift, whose ashes I placed close to him and to his brother. Another was a young man, a promising composer, who had died of a brain tumor. His wife and her parents had great difficulty in selecting a plot for him. She was young, her life completely overturned. Watching her father handle that extremely difficult afternoon with grace and finesse had an impact on me,

though I doubt that I have ever risen to his level of consideration and compassion.

Most of those I buried, though, were young men, dead of AIDS. A man would show up alone at the gate for our meeting, generally carrying a canister of ashes. More than once, I stood by as someone leaned his head against his arm against a tree, sobbing. Sometimes, he would have a few people with him and attempt a ceremony, but mostly it was the partner alone, both families having rejected them.

After three or four months of that, I was more than ready to get back to the harsh world of sub-Saharan West Africa.

Not by Bread Alone

Blogographia X

THE SCHOOL OF TEACHING WITHOUT TEACHING

5/16/12 - In her novella *Wise Blood*, Flannery O'Connor has character Hazel Motes create the Church of Christ Without Christ. [Thomas Friedman](#)

has apparently joined its contemporary offshoot, the School of Teaching Without Teaching. Certainly, he sounds like a true believer.

Friedman, and all those people at Stanford, MIT and Harvard (to mention just a few) who are touting new technological platforms that can offer “courses” to something like 100,000 people at a time also believe that they are seeing (and participating in) something new. In terms of educational devices that can reach huge audiences, we’ve had a means for years: books. Though books alone have rarely proven sufficient for education, they have certainly been the sole tools in many cases—just as these online “courses” can be.

In terms of technology, all that’s being done here is creating

digitally what experimental psychologists were creating half a century ago—but those creating tools today are doing it without the knowledge the psychologists were bringing to their projects and (more importantly) without having looked back to try to understand why those psychologists, almost to a person, abandoned the idea of focusing education primarily on teaching machines and programmed instruction. They didn't give them up completely, but learned that education requires a great deal more than technology. For most of us, it requires teaching—not just the "learning" that someone can do through books or computers.

One is not teaching when talking to a camera or when preparing a series of assignments and evaluations. One is abdicating from the hard work that is necessary on one side of the education equation. When one comes to believe that technology alone is sufficient, one removes education from the equation....

This morning, before leaving for school, I [responded](#) to Thomas Friedman's [piece](#) in today's *New York Times*. I wrote quickly. Though today is "reading day" before final exams, I am responsible for a good deal of advisement and needed to get to the college so that I could talk to students face-to-face. As a teacher, that's an important part of what I do, both in and out of the classroom.

It astonishes me just how little value is placed, in American society, on the personal interaction between student and teacher. Students crave it; even when they don't use it, they demand it be there. Time after time, we see that the most successful teaching occurs when teachers have substantial direct personal contact with students. That contact is not just in lecture halls (though that can be a small part of it) or even in offices. It is in the hallways, dining rooms, club meetings ... in the dozens of small

daily interactions that can lead to discussion and the sparking of interest.

We forget that the first great teacher in the Western tradition, Socrates, succeeded through discussion, not presentation, through challenging his students and responding to them.

With the advent of mass media through Gutenberg in the 15th century, teachers gained their first great tool since the days of Socrates, the mass-produced book. With copies cheap and easily produced, the book allowed teachers to expand their repertoire far beyond their own expertise, making reference and research possible for all students, not just the elite with access to what had been rare (and small) libraries. The book did not lessen the need for teachers. If anything, it expanded that need, for more people now demanded education. With books available, they wanted to know how to use them.

Only the rare person is a true autodidact. Even that person, though they may gain learning while alone, gathers in knowledge created by others. No one starts from zero and recreates knowledge on their own. What books were (and are) good for, and what digital tools help with today, is access to the knowledge that came before. What the writer does, or the creator of the digital “courses” Friedman lauds does, is organize that knowledge and, perhaps, move it forward just a bit. But this does not constitute teaching, though it does provide opportunity.

Opportunity of this sort is only rarely taken advantage of by the individual alone. Few of us have the will and desire of Frederick Douglass, one of the only people successful in taking control of his education before it had really started happening and deliberately making others into his teachers:

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white

boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.

That dedication to the gaining of knowledge is unusual. From the very start, most of us need interaction with educated teachers who are focused on the task of instilling within us that desire to learn that Douglass evidently had by nature. Most of us need help in becoming learners, and that help can't come from books or digital platforms alone.

The belief that students all bring desire to learn with them, that everyone wants to learn, is mythical for all that it is pervasive....

The Burger in the Story

When I was a senior in high school, I worked for a while flipping burgers in the Hamilton College student union. One night ... let me tell the story how I often relate it and then explain the truth (this tale is brought to you in spite of the spirits of Joseph Ellis and Brian Williams):

When I was just about to shut down the grill and start cleanup, I saw a bus

pull up outside of the joint but thought nothing of it. Soon after, five or six tall and sweaty black guys came inside, acting as though they owned the place. I stopped what I was doing and turned to them.

"Thirty burgers, fifteen orders of fries, and fifteen milkshakes."

I shrugged, made them, bagged them up, and took their money—including a nice tip. They walked outside and I watched as they got onto that bus I'd seen earlier. As they were driving away, I saw on the side of the bus, "Marvin Gaye."

Well, that's not quite the truth. Marvin Gaye and his band had played the college fieldhouse that night, and they did come in for burgers after the show—and it was just as I was about to turn off the grill. But there was no bus that I could see and no surprise: I knew exactly who they were.

So, why do I change the story when I tell it?

First of all, I like better the idea that I'm not working in a student union but in a greasy hamburger joint. There's a certain romance to that. Second, there is the fake drama of big black guys coming in at closing time. Our weird national fascination is such that any story mentioning big black guys automatically makes listeners—black, white, or whatever—think something nasty is about to happen and I play on that, turning it on its head. Third, I pretend not to know who they were, also for the sake of suspense.

In other words, I lie for the sake of the story.

Not here, not in an "academic autobiography." And not in a classroom. There, I simply say that I once made hamburgers for Marvin Gaye and his band.

Blogographia XI

STRANGE TRUTH—OR FICTION?

2/6/15 - "Brian Williams Admits He Wasn't on Copter Shot Down in Iraq," [says the headline](#) in *The New York Times*. The newscaster "apologized Wednesday for mistakenly claiming he had been on a

helicopter that was shot down." A decade-and-a-half ago, Pulitzer Prize winner Joseph Ellis [apologized](#) for having claimed in his classrooms to have served in combat in Vietnam when he had not done so.

Neither of these incidents is unusual. People exaggerate their experiences all the time. Our stories get better as time goes on, often until they have little relation to the truth—as happened in both of these cases. What is unusual is that both have high profiles in the media, where such deviations tend to get noticed.

I've an exercise I use each time I teach a writing course, one on authority and honesty. I tell the story of an incident in Togo when I was a Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV). Looked at dispassionately, it seems like it couldn't be true.

The truncated version is this: Only the morning of August 2, 1990, while I was drinking coffee under an awning outside my house, listening to the BBC about Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, I saw an elephant approaching. It would pass near me on its way back to the *Fosse aux lions*, the game preserve whose border was just across the road. I wanted to take its picture, so I grabbed my camera bag and the radio and walked to the top of a small rise the elephant would likely pass by. It was just about dawn: I pulled out my light meter and two cameras, checked my settings and



waited for the elephant, which was following a path between bean fields. When it was as close as I dared stay, I snapped two pictures and prepared to slowly back down the little hill and return home.

But the elephant had

other ideas: Without raising its trunk or flapping its ears, usual warnings, it charged straight at me. I ran, but fell, losing my sandals as I slid to the wet ground and turning to face the elephant, wanting to see what was going to kill me.

It didn't, obviously, but stopped a few meters from me and stared at me. Slowly, I removed the straps from cameras, the meter and the bag from around my neck—they'd been flopping around as I ran. Next to me, speaker in the mud, the radio babbled. The elephant turned, looking at me sideways. I scramble up and sprinted past it, heading the opposite way it was facing. Stopping eventually, I turned to see it go over to my cameras and radio, pick each piece up with its trunk, taste it and drop it. Finally, it swung my camera bag by the strap and threw it—then turned and walked into the *Fosse*. I collected my scattered belongings and returned home.

Over the years, I've written about this in numerous fashions—even as fiction—starting with a recounting in the little PCV newsletter we had. I try to keep as close to the truth as I can but a quarter of a century has passed and I sometimes wonder if I haven't changed the tale in the writing. There are versions, I know, that are not quite accurate: In one, I write of telling the story to other PCVs who had arrived at a restaurant in a nearby town on motorcycles. They hadn't. They had arrived in a Peace Corps vehicle, having stopped by my village and having already heard the story from people there who had witnessed it.

Anyhow, when I tell the story to my students, I warn them that they should be careful of what a person in authority says, for it is too easy to believe—but that they should not be completely skeptical, either. I then give them a few days to think about the story, to research

what they can, and to come to a determination about its truth. When they do, and I have collected their writings, they always want me to tell them which it is, fact or fiction.

"Should you believe me, one way or another?" I respond. That stumps them.

Into the World

For vacation at Christmas time in 1964, my family took the train from Bangkok to Poipet on the Cambodian border, walked across a metal frame bridge and caught a bus to Sisophon and then Siem Reap where we stayed at l'Hotel de la Paix and visited Angkor Wat. That bridge held the first sign of recent military dispute that I had ever seen: a hole in one of the girders, the pieces on each side twisted in the same direction. The border between the two countries, apparently, was always a little fuzzy.

The bus we got on took more passengers and luggage than anyone in our family had ever imagined, though we had lived in Thailand for more than six months (my father had a Fulbright, teaching at Thammasat University) and thought we knew overcrowding. Decades later, in Africa, I would remember that bus fondly: the Cambodians were pikers compared with the Burkinabe and Togolese when it came to cramming in just one more, and more again, onto any vehicle.

Still, Angkor was all it could possibly have been and probably much more. My brothers and I bought little crossbows that we each kept, I think, well into adulthood. It was a wonderful trip. We had no idea of the hotel bombing that killed sixty (including two Americans) in Saigon, not so far away, really, or that our school would double in size as soon as vacation was over, as American embassy dependents and other families of U.S. officials would be moved either to Guam (I think it was) or Bangkok. Or that our lives would change

because of an escalating war that none of us would ever see personally. The Angkor trip, seen from my vantage point today, was something of an idyll before an era of ferment and destruction.

Back in the U.S., my father would end up teaching at four universities over the next six years, moving in part for political reasons. The year in Thailand had changed the family, making us much more aware of Southeast Asia and totally against a war that we now knew a great deal about from friends and classmates in Bangkok. And we now knew about government lies: the Air Force officers who lived in our building would disappear for days at a time to northern bases—while the U.S. government was claiming no bombing of Vietnam came from Thailand.

At home, my father started attending weekly vigils, sometimes alone, trying to raise consciousness about the war. He and my mother—and my brothers and I—were also radicalized in other ways, seeing our United States in an entirely new light.

No longer was the U.S. the world.

Blogographia XII

DUST AND SMOKE

8/18/07 - Everyone south of the Sahara in Africa, and not just those in the region where I lived, knows dust and smoke intimately. From Abidjan to Mombasa, Africans understand what these twinned hazes mean to their lives, their futures. Dual signs of the destruction of the savanna—born of the over-use of farmland and of wood burned as fuel—they've become omens, precursors of the desert sands certain to follow. Signals, they are, that life in the villages will only get harder as time passes.

The African farmers I worked with and taught in Tambaong aren't stupid, just pessimistic. Like most others over the continent, they know that their agricultural methods destroy their land, diminishing the

productivity of their fields each year; they see rains carrying off what little top soil remains and watch winds sweeping up the rest. They leave the soil vulnerable, yet do not change their ways—they know they cannot do that and survive in the short term. Though understanding full well that each field should lie fallow every seven years (along with other needs of the soil), they are so poor that they haven't the margin today to allow the future that gain. Cotton demolishes soil, they agree, but what other cash crop that can successfully replace it?

African women face similar problems. They cannot spare the money for stoves that run on bottled gas, and the charcoal they could afford destroys the forests nearly as fast as their own wood-gathering does. The branches they use for cooking and for making millet beer must be carried home from farther and farther away each year, and the women don't like the burden. Better stove-building methods conserve wood in the brewing of millet beer, but cookfires are kept old-fashioned and simple—and inefficient—in part because the efficient mud stoves do not light the compounds at night the way three-rock stoves do. Without the light from cookstoves, more money has to be spent on kerosene and lanterns. It's cheaper, if more difficult, to walk a little farther each day. Here again, poverty contributes to the destruction of the land, contributes, ultimately, to further poverty.

Obviously, dust and smoke encompass villages far beyond those of the Moba of Tambaong and their tiny strips of farmland: from Senegal to Somalia, the same problems haunt sub-Saharan Africa. People, including the Africans (it's not just foreigners who intelligently observe Africa's plight), watch populations around them growing fast while arable land shrinks and agrarian-based economies stagnate. All anguish over what they see. None of them, not an African agronomist,

not a European aid worker, not an American tourist, not an Asian businessperson, has found a successful counterforce.

Togo isn't much different from any of the fifteen or so countries in sub-Saharan West Africa. For a time, it was a little richer than most, but that has changed since the student strikes that began in 1990 and the devaluation, four years later, of the West African franc, the currency that measures Togo's wealth. Most of Togo's 4-million people live in the southern half of the country, more lush, more productive than the savanna of the north, of Tambaong. Life expectancy, something of an indication of the quality of life, is a bit less than 60 years, though probably somewhat lower in the north. Not bad, all in all, for the developing world. A hard place, but one where a life can be built—for the present....

Soon after the country's independence in 1960, the leaders in Lomé, like most leaders of countries with beaches and forests, began to realize that tourism could become an important revenue source. They saw how Kenya's game preserves drew so many Europeans and so much money; they decided to establish a couple of parks in Togo. They put these parks far in the north of the country, where people's complaints would be less heard.

The *Fosse aux lions*, the park just north of Tambaong, had been initially established by the French in the mid-1950s. In those days it wasn't much, merely a small, low, wet area where animals tended to congregate. Liking to hunt, the French had wanted to keep the animals coming. They confiscated the land, including a few rice fields belonging to Mateyendou Sambiani, the traditional Moba chief of the region, and declared a preserve.

Home Again

Back in the states after the Peace Corps, I turned to adjuncting. But six years (essentially) away from academia had stripped me of understanding of the hierarchies and mores of academia. As a result, I made myself unwanted at George Washington University and Southeastern University and barely squeaked by at Catholic University of America (one of the only places, in my experience at that time, where adjuncts were treated as colleagues). Did a little more of it once I moved to New York, but realized it wasn't working for me.

At George Washington, I stopped class when a couple of the strongest students were making fun (and not for the first time) of one of the students not up to their standards. I called them out on their behavior, probably not as gently as I might today, using that as a means for discussion of decorum by the entire class. Though the rest of the class clearly appreciated what I was doing, those two—entitled and arrogant—did not. They complained to the chair, who observed a class of mine the next week—on Emerson—that she declared acceptable. She did not, however, offer me a section the next semester. At Southeastern, I refused orders from an administrative assistant about how to conduct my class. At CUA, it was gently explained to me that I had neither the rights nor the privileges of full-time faculty, but I did continue teaching there until I moved.

In New York, where I spent a year as an administrator/teacher for another Quaker school, I also worked a bit as an adjunct at Long Island University. Eventually, I dropped the teaching, all of it. Or, it dropped me. I hadn't made people too happy at the Quaker school (I quit at the end of the year) or at LIU, either. I didn't understand how precarious the adjunct existence is, how much contingent faculty are at the mercy of those full-timers who can act so smug and pretentious without ever realizing it. Most of them would sign any petition for adjunct rights or raise their fists in solidarity. Then as now, they refused to recognize their hypocrisy.

The anger of the adjunct experience is hard to jettison.

I constantly fight the inertia that could turn even me, who has been an adjunct, into

one of them. It happens, and happens often, when we are lucky enough to land on the tenure track.

Blogographia XIII

ON THE TEACHING OF WRITING

10/3/06 - Though most of my training is in literature, I've become more and more interested, over the years, in writing and writing pedagogy. This started back in grad school, when I worked for a bit in Lou Kelly's writing lab at the University of Iowa—where I was introduced to the likes of Mina Shaughnessy, Peter Elbow and the many others developing new ways of teaching writing in the 1970s. After my four years in Africa in the late 1980s, I taught part time for a bit at Long Island University, where Deborah Mutnick introduced me to the important work of David Bartholomae.

I quickly lost interest in teaching, though, and turned my attention to building and running a café and a gift store.

By the time I returned to teaching, about a decade later, I assumed that the methodologies that were being developed in decades past had come to be standards—that the teaching of writing had actually evolved even further, and that I would find myself entering a whole new world of writing pedagogy.

Of course, I was wrong.

If anything, by the early years of this decade, much (not all, fortunately) of the teaching of writing had slid backwards into grammar-based pedagogy, had become dominated by a new breed of Comp/Rhet PhDs who are more interested in theory about classroom teaching than in actual classroom teaching, or was mired in strategies—like Ken Bruffee's small groups—which had worked well with an earlier

generation of students but were not meeting the needs of a new generation in their old configurations. Not only that, but there was a new emphasis on testing that was turning the teaching of writing into the teaching of puzzle solving, of how to put the right pieces in exactly the right places....

Emphasis on “contact,” on audience, has become the touchstone of much of my pedagogy. If we’re not writing for somebody—or to somebody—just what are we doing when putting fingers to keyboards? Some of us, once we have reached a certain level of ease, are able to write for the pleasure of it or simply for ourselves, but most people cannot do that—and have no reason to. I even see grammar in terms of “contact”: the only reason to use “good” grammar is to facilitate communication, to make it easier for the audience to understand the writer as precisely as possible.

My focus on audience has a long history, going back to my childhood as the son of a “radical behaviorist” follower of B.F. Skinner. Skinner’s basic stimulus/response model was something I was aware of even in junior high; in graduate school, I read his *Verbal Behavior* and started to understand writing itself as a dynamic represented by an S/R continuum.

It is from Skinner that I developed my concern that much of what we do is ask students to talk to a piece of paper rather than to another person. We focus on what is on that paper, sometimes to the detriment of the ultimate purpose of the writing—communication, providing a stimulus that elicits a response that either reinforces our writing (success at communication) or shows us that we need to try something different.

This concern has led me to begin to use blogs in my classroom. Through their blogs, students see much more clearly that they are

involved in something more than designing a problem-free page. They start to take pride not only in their presentation but in the conversations they spark....

Enough. If I don't stop now, I will go on far too long for one post.

And, after all, this is my first blog entry on writing pedagogy. I've done what I wanted, have provided an overview of a few of my current concerns—along with a bit on what I am doing these days....

We'll then see how it goes.

The Smell of Ink

Ernest Morgan started to teach me the basics of printing in the fall of 1963, when I was eleven. At that point, all we had at Arthur Morgan School was a tabletop clamshell lever press of the sort meant for printing names on bookplates, naturally enough, for Ernest was the founder and manager of the Antioch Bookplate Company. We had a single cabinet of job cases, a couple of composing sticks, a pica measure, assorted blocks and quoins and a key, gauge pins, wood "furniture" (as printers call it), tubes of ink, a marble-surfaced table, and all of the other odds and ends of a small, amateur operation. The shop would soon expand: Ernest's son Lee (Alphonse's roommate up in Yellow Springs, Ohio) almost destroyed his VW microbus hauling a Chandler & Price flywheel press to the school.

I fell in love with printing. In particular, I loved lead type and the smell of ink. Later, in tenth grade, in Holland, Michigan, I insisted on taking Graphic Arts, something school administrators did not like, for there was an absolute divide between the college prep students and those studying in the vocational building. There, I learned the rudiments of offset printing and its necessary darkroom work, and how to operate vacuum-fed flywheel

presses. More than anything else, though, I liked working as a compositor, setting type and justifying it.

In Clinton, New York, where I would graduate from high school, I got a job as a printer's devil at the local weekly paper, melting lead and pouring it for linotype pigs and into stereotype molds and operating the folder on press days for the newspaper. The printed word had been my first love—even as a preschooler, books had held a special fascination for me—but now I could see them in different context.

At that point in my life, all I wanted to do was deal with lead type, paper, and ink.

Blogographia XIV

ON THE TEACHING OF WRITING II

10/06/06 - Years ago, close to the time I left teaching (for what I thought was forever), I was working with a group of students who were preparing for first-year composition and completion of their GEDs. The students were fairly typical basic writers—bright enough, but lacking in classroom confidence and mechanical skills. When I could get them to forget where they were, wonderful discussions—even arguments—ensued. But I was having difficulty getting them to transfer their thoughts to paper in anything but the most constricted form.

About halfway through the semester, I decided to take one writing from each student, edit it for mechanical problems, and place it within a newsletter I created. As a former printer and compositor—and as one who had designed various publications—I knew I could present the newsletter in a way that the students would see as professional. Because the students did not know they would appear, I kept their names out of it.

When I handed out the newsletter, I said nothing about it, simply

sat back and let the students read. They started to recognize the stories fairly quickly (we did a lot of sharing in class). A buzz began to grow as they associated work they were reading with the authors—and discovered their own contributions.

From that point on, that class was a breeze, and a joy to teach. The students had seen that they could enter into a public sphere and succeed—that they could write well and get others to respond.

"Get others to respond."

That, I've found (now that I've returned to teaching), is the key. Make them feel empowered, as they say, within whatever sphere they are writing for, and students will produce. If they feel someone is listening, taking seriously what they are saying (and not worrying so much about the "alots" and "definatelys"), their confidence begins to grow and they begin to write even more.

Time passes and technology changes, of course, and I no longer use newsletters in my classes (I never did use them for every class—each situation, of course, requiring its unique strategy). Instead, I use blogs to the same purpose. Oftentimes, I use a little bit of deceit, a minor version of tossing someone into the deep end and forcing them to swim: I tell the students to give the url of their blogs to their friends and family without reminding them that they are now writing in public, and will have to accept responsibility for everything they post. That, by the way, is one of the reasons (or so I believe, with the fact that they are graded on their blogs being another) that I find little chat shorthand in their blog entries.

With the professionalization of the media has come a feeling on the parts of many, especially those lacking confidence in their writing skills, that they are not welcome to participate in the greater public debates—that all they can do is watch. That their only participation

comes as an either/or in the voting booth. The trend toward this was chronicled as far back as the 1920s by Walter Lippmann, who felt that it should be so, that most people are not equipped to deal with the nuances of policy and that the educated elite should present choices only as simple dichotomies.

As for myself, as for most teachers of basic writing, there's something inherently undemocratic about Lippmann's attitude. We're much more in line with John Dewey, who felt that life-long education and participation in the political discussions were cornerstones to the success of any democracy. Rather than telling people about issues, we want to involve them in the debate on those issues—and at a far more integral level than simply making a choice in a voting booth.

The "basic" in basic writing is more than simply an evaluation of student skills. It implies a certain assumed base level for participation in American society, a base everyone should have, one that allows them to participate fully in the public sphere.

The teaching of basic writing, then, has an inherent political aspect. It is anti-elitist, coming down heavily on the Dewey side of that Dewey/Lippmann debate. It is "liberal" on a fundamental level, for its task is to expand the public sphere, to bring in those who have been excluded....

Adjunct Academic Freedom

My last semester at Long Island University's Brooklyn campus, I was teaching a course in Masterworks of Literature, or some such, and covered *Long Day's Journey into Night*. As an ex-drunk, that play has something of a draw for me. Anyway, I was being observed. The professor told me she would have to leave before the class was over to deal with her child. Fine by me, I said, but we are starting with a play cutting. Only after that would I do anything, and discussion would come even later.

The group of students did a great job with their reading. I got up next and described my family and my own relations with alcohol and drugs. I told them about how my grandmother battled even the appearance of alcohol in her home—the result of her own father's continual drunkenness—and how my grandfather had to hide cans of beer. I told of my own “experiments” with drugs in the 1960s and my decades of struggle with booze. I told them about other family members and their problems. The students were enthralled; the observer was clearly horrified.

She left just as I was turning the conversation over to the class.

She missed a wonderful discussion. My students, seeing that even their professor's family could be supremely fucked up, opened up. Even Eugene O'Neill, I suspect, would have been proud. By the end of class, we had concluded that Tolstoy, in his comment at the beginning of *Anna Karenina*, was absolutely right—and that none of us in the room, not one, came from a happy family.

I refused to have anything to do with the observation report that resulted (something I would do again at Brooklyn College, over a decade later, when an observer populated his written report with a diatribe against the students but with nary a mention of me). It was scathing. How dare I? The worst class she'd ever seen.

The store was taking more and more of my time at that point, so I felt I could safely refuse to meet with her and then could tell the chair to stuff it, though in somewhat more polite terms.

Of course, I wasn't invited to teach a course the next semester.

Even after a number of semesters as an adjunct, I had no idea how to act subserviently in an academic situation. Still didn't, when I returned to teaching during the next decade. Though an adjunct, I still expected to be treated as an equal, a colleague.

Fat chance.

Politics and the Classroom

Years later, as an assistant professor, I learned that the power of the teaching observation is not wielded solely against adjuncts and contingent hires. The woman who had first suggested that I check with City Tech (the local name for CUNY's New York City College of Technology) for adjunct teaching was not satisfied with my thanks five years later, when I returned from teaching in Pennsylvania to take a tenure-track position. She decided to take me down a peg or two through an observation report that, when I showed it to the chair before signing it, made his jaw drop. Looking it over, he noticed that the conference (when the professor had berated me for close to half an hour—and where I had been given no possibility of responding) had taken place outside of the stipulated time limit after the date of the observation, invalidating it and the report. He observed my class the next week and wrote a glowing report. That's what ended up in my file.

Thank goodness (sometimes) for the bureaucratic method!

The next semester, with a new chair in place, my ex-friend tried again through a long-time colleague of hers. The observed class took place the day before the 2008 election. The students were on edge. Fifteen minutes in, I abandoned my plans for the day and let the students talk about the election, joining in from time to time to keep the conversation on track and civil.

I had known from the time I'd seen who was to observe me that the report would be a bad one, but, alerted by what had gone on before, I knew that I could likely find an

irregularity that would allow it to be thrown out. The long-term tenured faculty had become relaxed in attention to detail. They have become more vigilant since, but not before I was twice able to take advantage of their carelessness.

Blogographia XV

POLITICS AND THE CLASSROOM: AN ATTEMPTED CLARIFICATION

4/14/05 - Though I have long suspected that the clash between the right and (mostly liberal) academia comes from a conflation of issues and expectations, I have not been able to verbalize the problem to my own satisfaction. Yet I have continued to try, and have engaged people on the right, to try to come to my own understanding of the problem.

The other day, I emailed a man—I'll call him "Larry"—whom I'd been going back and forth with in a comments section of [Michael Berube](#)'s blog. He seemed like a nice fellow (and he is), not a wingnut, though his views are certainly on the right of the spectrum and he does see academia as a cloistered world divorced from reality.

Unfortunately, our email exchange quickly frustrated "Larry." After only a few back-and-forths, he emailed me, "I don't know, but you seem like one of those Define Your Terms and Cite Your Authority types with whom conversation is impossible without getting pissed off."

He's right (though I am always leery of refuge in authority): I do want those involved in discussion to define their terms. I hate it when people throw out statements and then refuse to explain what they are saying, and why.

And that, of course, is at the core of the problem. He gets pissed off because I am approaching the discussion from an academic point of view when he wants to keep it in the political, where the ground-rules

are quite different.

Simply put (and you all know this, but it does bear repeating), in our political system, no one has to explain their beliefs, or even defend them. Anyone's belief, no matter how cockeyed, has to be respected. We must trust to the individual to come to his or her own decision, by whatever method they choose. And that, as we all recognize, is extremely important—it safe-guards us from those amongst us (either Leninist, neo-con, or of any other belief) who think they know what's best for us, and want to force that on us "for our own good."

In an academic setting, however, the needs and goals are different. There, the fact of a belief is not sufficient. For it to be respected in a university, a belief has to be defended. By its very nature, academia is not democratic, nor should it be: at its best, it is a meritocracy, place where the best expressed and defended ideas rise to the top, and rise through a process of revision and refinement based on rigorous discussion and on experiment via the scientific method.

If we try to apply "democracy" unilaterally to the university, we destroy it. All beliefs are not created equal; ideas achieve respect only by surviving a process of debate and even attack. Their places have to be earned, not assumed. Otherwise, there can be no growth, no moving forward, and intellectual life is stifled.

On the other hand, I (for one) don't want to *live* in a meritocracy (working in what often seems like a parody of one is enough, thank you). It tends to develop an elite (just as our universities do), a group believing that its own judgments are superior to those of the masses—be they students or the general populace. And it does not provide the basic respect for the integrity of the individual and the individual's beliefs that allows for the freedom and experimentation that are so

important to our lives. I have problem enough with the “peer review” system we have within our universities. The last thing I want is for that to migrate to the rest of my life.

What we have in America, then, and have had for generations, is an uneasy (and necessary) truce between the two, of democracy and meritocracy. This has worked well for us, has been part of our success as a country, though it has not been comfortable.

If, as those attacking the universities from the right want, we start to insist that political beliefs be respected in the same way in the classroom that they *must* be respected in regard to the voting booth, we will simply end up destroying the universities—and tearing down one of the bases of our success. Unlike in the political system, it is not the person who should be respected in the academy, but the idea expressed. And its respect should not be based on the fact of its existence, but on its defense. This is a necessary part of any attempt to build academic excellence.

Somehow, we need to re-learn that an attack on an idea in a classroom is not an attack on that idea within the political arena. Nor is it an attack on the person holding that belief. It is simply a demand that the idea be defended if it is to be seriously considered.

So, yes, “Larry,” I do insist that terms be defined and I don’t respect ideas that are provided without definition or defense. But that doesn’t mean I don’t respect the holder of that idea or that I want to limit their ability to participate in the political discourse of our nation. I simply want them to recognize that academic discourse is a different thing, with different ends and means.

Circular Journalism

I spent the summer of 1972 as a nightside copyboy in the third-floor newsroom of the *New York Times* on West 43rd Street. At the end of the summer, Sammy Solovitz, the legendary head copyboy who had waltzed into the building to deliver a telegram in 1943 and never left, asked if I wanted to stay on—a first step to a possible career at the *Times*. I would have had to finish college part time and in New York, and I didn’t care as much for Brooklyn College, where I had taken classes the summer before, as I did for Beloit, so I sadly said no. Though I have worked in journalism occasionally since, that was a key decision, shifting me from one word track to another, though I would not know that for a decade.

That said, I loved it at the *Times*.

If you are going to speed around in circles, picking up pieces of paper one place and depositing them in another, constantly on alert for the yelled word “copy,” you might as well do it during the summer of 1972. Watergate, George Wallace shot, what seemed like continual airplane hijackings, the Fischer-Spassky chess match, and political conventions: going to work was *never* boring. The learning was phenomenal—and there were no tests.

It was only later, though, that I learned to write for a newspaper. I learned it from an editor at *The Westerly Sun* in Rhode Island during the summer of 1975. I was a temporary replacement covering outlying town councils and school boards and writing the occasional feature—along with non-reportorial duties at the newspaper. I would cover something in the evening and arrive at the paper at five o’clock in the morning to prepare my story for an eleven o’clock deadline. The editor—whose name I wish I could remember—would show up between seven and eight. And he would immediately tear my story to pieces. I would try again, and again, finally beginning to understand what “audience” meant (he was it, though as advocate for a larger one) and how to structure a story for readers.

Somehow, I must have started to please him, for I began getting really fun assignments. The best was a week at the county fair with my own photographer, a feature a day. Saturday night was the big show, starting with a bluegrass band from Maine and

closing with a beauty pageant. One contestant stood out. She was smart, talented, and attractive. The photographer and I agreed. When all of the runners-up but the first had been announced, leaving only two possible winners out of the finalists, I sent him around to get a picture of the winner as she was announced.

Instead, he got a perfectly marvelous shot of consternation and disbelief. The first runner-up knew she should have won: the winner was clearly not in her league.

The photographer quickly got a few other acceptable shots, and I wrote a rather vapid story.

I did a little bit of investigating and learned that the winner was the niece of the organizer of the pageant, a woman with quite a bit of influence in town. When I suggested there might be a story there, I was told that there was not. And there never would be.

That's when I realized that I had made the right choice, back at the *Times*. Journalism could not be the career for me.

On Background

Blogographia XVI

FORTY YEARS AGO, THIS SUMMER

4/12/08 - Prague, August 6 or 7, 1968 (two weeks before the Russian tanks rolled in). Three o'clock or so, and I was in the gigantic central train station. The little tour with my erstwhile traveling companion was over (we'd finally found an official willing to extend our expired visas—mine to midnight only) and I needed a ticket, nothing more, to West Germany. Or, at least, close to West Germany. No trains, I knew, crossed that border. But no one at a ticket window seemed to speak any language I remotely found familiar. "Allemande?" Shaken heads.

"Deutschland?" Same thing. Finally, someone sold me a ticket to somewhere, a track number and a train number on it.

So, I found it and boarded. Entered an empty compartment. Took off my cheap grey trench coat, bought in Munich, and folded it over my cheap grey backpack, also from Munich, and shoved them both onto the rack above, extracting the *London Times* I had somehow managed to buy somewhere in Prague. The air was stuffy, so I shoved down the top part of the window as far as it would go, sat, and closed my eyes.

Train moved, rhythm soothing, and I slept. A thump or a bump sometime later, and I awoke, running my hand over my hair—gritty, strange. I looked at my palm: streaked with black. Black speckles covered the newspaper on my lap. At a turn, I could see the train ahead out the window: we were pulled by a coal locomotive.

Wow. But where was it taking me? Due east, I imagined, Russia and the disappearance of a stupid American kid.

There was, at least, a name on the ticket, along with the numbers, and I watched the stations, hoping to see it.

An hour or so later, I did, and hopped down onto the platform of a tiny station in the midst of a number of tracks, many with electric lines over them. I walked inside—and here, oh such favor!, was a map with a you-are-here star. I was, I saw, on the German border, but the wrong one... I had no visa for East Germany.

There was a town near what was clearly the West German border: "Cheb," I shouted to the man behind the little window.

He frowned, then motioned me toward him, then kept motioning. Understanding, I started shoving money towards him. He took some of it, shoved the rest back along with a ticket, then ran outside. I followed, dubious.

A little electric train was heading past the station on one of the farther tracks. He flagged it down and motioned me aboard.

This time, there were no compartments, just bench seats in an open car, occupied by what were clearly multiple generations of one family, what I knew then as "gypsies," what I would now refer to as "Roma."

The oldest woman talked to me, got nothing out of me, finally asking me a question. I understood, I thought, one word, sounded like "Rouski." She was asking if I were a Russian. I said, "No, American."

Everyone laughed. She rubbed thumb and forefinger together and said, "American? Gelt? Gelt!" Now, I laughed, too. "Keine gelt." She clearly didn't believe me, but was mollified by the Marlboro cigarettes I gave her and returned to where she had been sitting. One of the younger men came over on her instruction and handed me a number of curious cigarettes with long tubes and not much tobacco. Strong stuff: he showed me to pinch the tube so I wouldn't draw too much and continue the choking that had been nearly doubling me forward.

Cheb arrived about dusk, or we to it. At another window, I asked which way the border was. A curious look preceded a reluctant finger, and I turned to walk that direction in a light rain.

The road did take me out of town (I remembered from that map that Cheb wasn't on the border, simply near it), down a road that got smaller, then became a path, then ended at a gate with a not-so-friendly German Shepherd eyeing me from the other side.

Across a field, maybe a mile away, I could see a road, a lighted road heading to buildings. A road with cars on it.

The wet crop, whatever it was, soaked what little of me wasn't already sopping by the time I had crossed through it. Cars passing by,

some with German plates. Good. Likely heading to or from the border. But which way? One dark, into woods. The other toward those buildings.

I chose the buildings. Near them was a little sign.

"Cheb."

Two hours or so, and I had made a circle.

Logic said, "Other way."

So I walked. And tried to hitch-hike. And walked.

At one point, a huge noise came from the woods to my right, and a dog as big as a Mack truck came bounding towards me, attached to a uniformed giant with a weapon larger than he. I stopped. Petrified.

He motioned for my papers. I handed them over, shaking, along with a few more of my Marlboros. He grunted, took the cigarettes, handed my back my passport, and motioned for me to go on.

Now I knew, at least, that I was likely headed in the right direction.

Walking on, no cars stopped. Walking on, and a different sound came from behind—a tractor. I didn't bother to thumb, but it stopped. The driver, perhaps my age (I was sixteen), motioned me up behind him.

The noise of the engine was too loud for conversation, but he talked to me anyway, keeping up a steady monologue until we came to one of those guard stations straight out of a spy movie, moveable barrier and phone-booth-sized station—with an actual phone. My driver turned his tractor around and stopped. I climbed down, thanking him for going the extra mile, but I am sure he understood as little as I had of his tales. He chugged off and I walked over to the man in the booth.

In the distance, about 100 meters away, I could see the lights of the real border. Might just make it across.

The guard took my passport and made a call. He raised his voice and gestured (as best he could, in that confined space), and waited.

Then talked again, raised his voice again.

Finally, someone gave him satisfaction. He handed back my passport and motioned me towards the border.

Walking up, I handed my passport to the first guard I saw. He took it, told me to wait. I asked where I could change my Czech currency. He dismissed the need, said "souvenir," and disappeared into a building. Cars came and went, both directions, but he did not return for me, though I got the feeling that all of the other guards were watching me surreptitiously as they checked papers and passports.

There was something of a gift shop, and I was cold and wet and it looked dry, maybe even warm. So I went inside.

Some guy, a little older than me, perhaps college age and with a fresh college look that was already somewhat out of style but with hair long enough to make it clear to me that he wasn't military, was talking to a German couple, trying to change money with them. What struck me was that his German was worse than mine—and I could only speak a few phrases. What struck me, too, was his accent—certainly American.

"I know they say you can't take the money out, but they just told me to keep mine."

He looked over at me, in astonishment.

I had expected that.

What I had not been prepared for was that everything at the whole crossing stopped. Even outside. Every guard in sight was watching us.

The German couple sidled away. The other American looked around, nonplussed.

We stood looking at each other for a moment, as still as the tableaux we centered. He spoke first.

"You're an American, too."

I nodded.

"They seem to be interested that you spoke to me."

I nodded again.

"Well, got any idea why?"

I shook my head.

"Look," he said, "let's go over there and sit down, get out of the limelight."

We did.

He, I discovered, was 21, from Florida, a Romney Republican.

"Did you know that the balloting is going on tonight in Miami?" No, I did not. "Nixon will get it, but maybe he'll pick Romney for VP." I didn't really care. McCarthy was my man—but I didn't say that, simply that I had walked from Cheb and needed to be out of the country by midnight—or so my visa said.

He, it turned out, had walked from Cheb as well, and had been waiting there at the border for some hours. "Don't know what they're doing. Don't know why they won't let me through. Though, I suspect, that with two of us they are going to do it for even longer."

And they did.

I don't know how long it was before they finally gave us our passports and told us to walk on into West Germany. And I have no idea what they were doing, all the time they kept us there. There had been reports, I know, from Russia of caches of American arms found in the area. Maybe they thought we were soldiers, sneaking things across. Maybe they searched the whole area. I don't know.

There was a line across the road, marking the actual border.

Jumping across it, my companion bent down and kissed the ground,

yelling "frei, frei."

He got a few dirty looks from the Czechs. The German guards remained poker-faced and simply reached out hands for our passports.

The train station in the little town there was locked, but at dawn a man came and, in perfect English, told us there would be a train for Nuremberg along soon. He told us he had been in the SS, but had been captured early on in the war and had spent most of it in a camp in South Carolina.

The Floridian had a small radio he constantly tinkered with. A few minutes before the train arrived, he finally found an Armed Forces station broadcasting the Republican convention. The voting was going on. "The great state of Alabama casts however many votes for the next President of the United States, Richard Nixon." That sort of thing. Lots of cheers and noise-makers.

On the train, though, reception died. But Nuremberg wasn't really that far away. Just as we got off, they were announcing that Nixon was over the top, that he had the nomination.

As soon as I could, I ditched the Floridian, found a couple of guys who looked more like me (scruffy, hair to their shoulders—one Italian one Canadian), pooled ready cash with them, bought a liter of gin and a bottle of mixer, and climbed to the castle, where we sat, passing the two bottles back and forth until...

Well, I don't really remember until what.

Learning “Learning”

I've always suspected that I got into Iowa not because of my winning personality, not because of any “potential” anyone saw, not because I'd graduated from a good undergraduate school, but because of my GRE scores. That's really why I never questioned why I was admitted to the PhD program and not the MA program I'd applied for. The irony is that I did not deserve those scores and, on that basis, should never have been admitted to a program where I did, in fact, succeed.

Having decided that I wanted to be a student again, one aiming for a degree, I had bought a GRE study guide. I worked through it, spending as much time as I could on it. At the same time, though, I was taking a class, teaching, being a dorm parent, working in a garage—and drinking. Though maybe that last came first. The day before the exam, I took a practice test. My score was abysmal. So I did what any drunkard would do in such a situation and didn't stop doing it until four in the morning.

The exam was at nine. I arrived still three sheets to the wind. Focusing was difficult; I couldn't think about the questions. So I just answered each quickly and moved on to the next, completing each section just within the time allotted. At home, I renewed my drunk, knowing full well that my days as a student were numbered.

That number—those numbers—proved to be much more than I ever could have imagined. When the results of the GRE came in the mail, I saw there were three scores where I had expected the two of earlier days. Given that the categories had been expanded, so must have been the scale. That was the only thing that could account for the numbers. Either that, or I had won the guessing game as I might the lottery.

Which, of course, proved to be the case.

Tellingly, my lowest score was my Verbal one.

I'd always had a problematic relationship with high-stakes testing, this being only the latest time I'd tried to undercut myself. I think I sabotaged myself on the SAT, conflicted as to whether or not I really wanted to go to college at all. And I had gotten myself into trouble

over the New York State Regents Scholarship Exam. I won a scholarship, but I lost the battle surrounding it—though I may have eventually won that war, too.

When I returned from hitchhiking in Europe during the summer between junior and senior year, it was to a new family home in a new state—and an even more angry and radical attitude than I'd taken with me on my flight from Washington, D.C., to London just two months earlier. I wasn't the only one feeling as I did: the fallout from the Democratic Convention with its Chicago police riot was pervasive anger that autumn. The earlier assassinations of King and Kennedy had helped set an atmosphere of frustration across the nation and not just in me.

Clinton, New York, was an extremely conservative town, even down to its high school students. I was the only one there with long hair or the costume associated with the hippie. Daily, I would face physical threats from other students and even from older youths in the village. The teachers and administrators were of no help. The gym teacher abetted the harassment. He thought it was funny.

One day early in the fall, all of the seniors were hustled into a large room (there were only thirty or forty of us) and were given forms to fill out for the scholarship exam. It took me about thirty seconds, but the administrators felt they had to guide the students through every question, and slowly. After half an hour or so, I was bored silly. I started looking over the form and at my answers. On a whim, I took an eraser to my answer to "Are you an American Citizen?" and wrote in, "Unfortunately."

A stupid act, of course.

The guidance counselor, on going through the forms to correct the inevitable errors, went ballistic. He yelled at me for several hours straight, telling me I should be willing to go and die in Vietnam because his own father had come to this country to avoid the draft in Italy. I never figured that one out. He called my mother and asked her what to do with me. She laughed, which didn't help matters, and told him to send me back to class.

That same guidance counselor helped me with my college applications, telling me I would be fine. He lied. When all of them came back rejections, my father called contacts at

a couple of the schools and had them look at my file. In each one was a letter from my high school advising the college not to accept me, for I was a troublemaker. I ended up enrolling in Utica College, then a minor branch of Syracuse University. It had no reputation at all, was not even a real step up from Mohawk Valley Community College nearby. It was good for me, though, and I spent three semesters there. Summer of 1971, after a semester out of school working as a dishwasher and with my parents now living in Brooklyn, I took a couple of courses in the city and, in the fall, went out to Beloit in Wisconsin.

Writing “Writing”

Blogographia XVII

No MORE “WRITING WHORES,” PLEASE!

11/17/06 - A friend of mine, who teaches Journalism at a college some hours away from where I teach, recently invited a magazine writer to her class.

“I’m a writing whore,” the visitor declared, “I won’t write anything unless it’s for money.” She advised the students to do the same, to look for opportunities to earn twenty bucks writing restaurant reviews for Internet sites—to start from there, hoping to become high-priced whores themselves.

What a meager world that woman must live in!

To her, writing has become a thing, a product. Its meaning lies on the printed page or on the screen. The skill behind it becomes no more than the ability to put pieces together in the requisite manner—to please the “john” by meeting “his” expectations, but no more.

Writing should be much more than that—and good writing is.

Writing is meant to be part of a dynamic, of a conversation. To work, it needs to do more than fulfill someone's "requirements," be that an employer or a pimp.

Perhaps that magazine writer had composition teachers who, like so many, teach writing as though it is no more than a thing on a page, who concentrate on form ("It *must* be in proper MLA format or points will come off.") over content. Teachers who see a paragraph as a construct ("You must have a topic sentence and three supporting ones.") rather than a part of a message chain meant to generate one of a specific range of responses.

Perhaps that magazine writer had any passion for communicating through the written word beaten out of her by instructors who sacrificed her need for conversation on the altar of precision in grammar. By teachers who would have marked Walt Whitman down for his "neither time or place" in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

Yes, yes. Of course I know: Understanding of grammar and form is essential to the success of any writer—even one who writes in dialect needs to have a full grasp of the grammar particular to it. But that needs to come *after* one has grasped just what the writing itself does—after one understands that a piece of writing doesn't simply exist, that it *does*.

Many of us understand this from an early age, especially those of us raised in households where the written word performs as an important part of family conversation—where people read and respond to what they have read. Others, though, see writing as a mysterious jungle they are forced to hack through with little idea of direction or reason. The rules are arbitrary, the point obscure.

We might as well be teaching baseball to blindfolded, hobbled children, expecting them to gain expertise of the game through

memorization of rules and measures of distance. Only when they have proven “competence” in these would we release their eyes and their feet—but we would also be expecting them to now play at an all-star level.

When they stumbled around as ineptly as even a child who had never learned the rules, we would chastise them and bemoan the state of baseball today.

Across the way, on another field, a coach is letting the children play. Having passed out bats, gloves, and a ball, she has let the kids fool around, watching and pointing things out, but not yet trying to impose structure. Later, she will take them to watch a game played by skilled teams, explaining what is going on as the innings progress.

When it comes to a game of their own, her team will perform much better than those who learned all the rules before setting foot on a diamond.

The same is true of writing, yet many teach it as though grammar is a base for writing instead of a means for refinement.

Adding insult to injury, such a methodology takes away love of the game and love of the writing dynamic. Even someone who finds they can develop the skills for either baseball or writing through study of rules before application will never develop the kind of love for what they are doing that another, who had jumped in for the joy of it, experiences.

Which brings us back to the “writing whore.” If she loved writing, she would write. If she loved writing, she would develop her topics on her own rather than waiting for an assignment. If she loved writing, she would stand a chance of becoming a master able to sell what she produced. If she loved writing, she would have a chance of becoming really good at it rather than simply adequate for fulfilling the tasks set by another.

Me, I write whether I am paid or not. If something I compose

does bring me a little cash, I don't complain—but neither do I mind the file cases full (or they would be, if I saved things) of work that never earned a penny—much of it unread by anyone but me. Maybe I never will manage to sell what I write regularly or easily (not many of us do). But I will continue to enjoy what I do rather than seeing it solely as a task. And maybe I will be able to imbue my students with an attitude towards their own writing that will allow them to use the medium of the written word to partake in their own great conversations.

Though I may end up poorer than the prostitute, I'll bet that I—and all my writing partners (students, colleagues, and others)—will enjoy the process in ways the whore, for all her skills, can't even imagine.

It's in the Genes

My father made me memorize the names of Barlow ancestors back to 1630, when the first one showed up in Connecticut. There were no records connecting back to England, which always disappointed him. Since his death, DNA testing has opened new vistas ... and I have been able to determine that we still have Barlow relatives in England, in Blackburn, Lancashire.

The brother of the man I'm named for was a diplomat and poet. Not really a very good poet (except for one poem, "Advice to a Raven in Russia"), but quite something as a diplomat. Joel Barlow negotiated the Treaty of Tripoli of 1797, which says "the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion." He was the second American diplomat to die in service, trying to deliver a treaty to Napoleon in Poland in December 1812.

My own writing is colored absolutely by my family. Everything I do is. I want my students to develop interest in their own families as a part of their studies. They will learn more, and better, and may develop their own passions for learning within their personal cultural contexts.

Blogographia XVIII**LESSONS FROM A LYNCHING**

1/5/14 - My great-grandfather was involved with a lynching.

Not as a participant, fortunately, or victim—but involved he was.

Though I had heard tales of this, I knew no details until my brother sent me a box of old newspaper clippings from our great-grandmother. From there, I was able to find [a little more information](#) online. Most of what follows, however, comes from those clippings.



On April 15, 1894, Seymour Newlin was accused of attacking and raping an elderly woman in Rushsylvania, Ohio, about 8½ miles from the county seat of Bellefontaine. He was captured by locals and held in a "calaboose." Before the Logan

County sheriff (my great-grandfather, John Sullivan) arrived, a crowd of some 2,000 had surrounded the building. The sheriff's force was too small to force the issue and take the prisoner, and he was told that the jail would be dynamited if he even tried. He negotiated a face-saving truce (Newlin would be held until the arrival of a judge the next morning and given a speedy trial) and retreated. Of course, the crowd soon broke into the building and Newlin was quickly hanged.

One of the tattered clippings I have says this:

He [Newlin] effected an entrance through a window in the rear of the house, and removing his shoes, proceeded to the bedroom of Mrs. Knowles. She was aroused by his pulling at the bed clothing, and before she could utter a cry the villain clutched her by the throat, and with a threat to kill her if she made any resistance, proceeded to ravish her.

Leaving his victim he escaped through an outer door.

After the fiend had accomplished his hellish deed and left, Mrs. Knowles made her way to the house of Mr. William Newland only a few feet away, and aroused him, when she was taken in more dead than alive. Dr. C. M. Fisher was at once summoned and gave much needed medical assistance. The shock is so serious that it may prove fatal.

Seymour Newlin is a colored man of about 30 years of age who has served three terms in the State Prison for sundry crimes.

He has been accused of several attempts to outrage women, and has been an all-around tough....

There is another clipping, clearly written after the fact:

The Cleveland Leader criticizes Sheriff Sullivan severely for his course and Rushsylvania, in the Newlin case, and says "His conduct in leaving the prisoner in the hands of the mob when he was backed by a company of militia, * * * can be explained only on the ground of cowardice." This is unjust criticism. But it doesn't require any more capacity to criticize than it does to pound sand. Everybody can do it; everybody does it. Sheriff Sullivan has been an officer in our county for several years, and he has gone single handed, and alone, after the worst of criminals, into all kinds of places, and always got his man,—including thieves, bullies and murderers. He always showed true grit. He may have erred in judgment; he may have been afraid to assume the personal responsibility of pitting 18 young men against a mob of several hundred enraged men; he may have erred in accepting the promise of Rushsylvania citizens that no violence should be attempted. He no doubt thinks so now. But "hindsight is always better than foresight," and it is much easier to say now what should have been done, than to have said then, what should be done. Mr. Sullivan did not show cowardice there.

He went with the military company to the calaboose and stationed them about it, to protect the prisoner, in the face of the mob. If he had been a coward, he would have left the company to fight the battle out, regardless of the consequences, while he kept out of danger. Unjust criticism will not correct abuses or mistakes.

That's fair enough, I suppose, though I am also uncomfortable with what my great-grandfather did. Having never stood in his shoes, however, never having had to choose the certain death of one over the possible deaths of many (and, probably, without saving the life of that one), I dare not judge him....

There is a great deal about this that is disturbing—even sickening, even now, almost 120 years later. According to the [site](#) where I found mention of the Newlin lynching, there were 26 recorded in Ohio, the last being in 1932.

Logan County, which counts fewer than two percent of its population as black today (and likely had fewer back then), had just the one lynching. Not surprisingly (but sadly) the searingly obvious omission from all of the accounts of the lynching is consideration of race as a factor in the event. Some of the writers do condemn lynching, but they neither describe it nor condemn it as a racist act. The guilt of Newlin is assumed; his color, then, is tacitly deemed irrelevant.

But it is *not* irrelevant. Newlin was a reviled outsider in as lily white a community as one could find. Whatever he did or did not do, the white folks of Logan County did not see him as human. And did not, even before the crime that led to his lynching.

Need proof that race was not irrelevant? Just look at the record of lynchings: How many white victims do you find? Not so many.

Would my great-grandfather have stood up to the mob if

Newlin had been white? I do not know, of course. But the fact is that he probably would not have had to. The crime would have stirred the community, but the accused would have been allowed his day in court.

I am glad I came across these clippings in 2014, when way too many people are still claiming (even after the stream of racist events of the past year) that we Americans live in a “post-racial” society. The writers for the newspapers of Logan County in 1894 probably thought that they, too, were “post-racial” (though they would not have known the term), and that they were right to judge the lynching not in terms of race, but of inappropriate mob justice. Some of them might have been Civil War veterans, even, men proud of having helped “free” the slaves. So might have been some in the lynch mob. They felt justified in ignoring the role of race in America, though we know now that they were abetting the continuation of the racial problems that still bedevil American society. They felt justified in ignoring the role of race in the lynching of Newlin, though they should have been able to see (and probably did, but would not admit it) that race had everything to do with it. The same is true today for many of us.

Though actual lynching may no longer occur, attitudes behind them continue.

Can we learn lessons from this, even now?

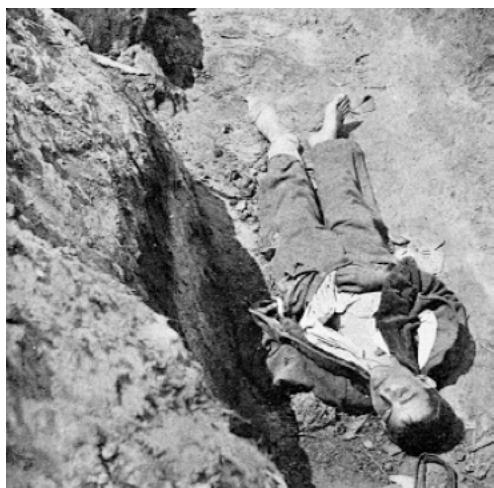
The other side of my family, mainly Scots-Irish, ended up in Western North Carolina in the 1700s, following the Great Wagon Road from Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to Salisbury, North Carolina, where my grandmother’s family would remain for well over a century. My grandfather’s people ended up a little bit west, in Wilkes County, which would one day

spawn NASCAR champion and bootlegger Junior Johnson. My grandfather left there, he said, because he got tired of looking at the south end of a northbound mule. His story and that of his and his wife's ancestors sparked one of my books.

Blogographia XIX

NOSTALGIA, OR WISHFUL THINKING

2/20/11 - When it comes to being a son of the Confederacy, my credentials are hard to beat. Three of my great-great-grandfathers fought for the South, one of them taken prisoner during the breakout at Petersburg, VA on April 2, 1865. He spent the remaining months of the war in a POW camp in Maryland. His brother-in-law also served, as did quite a number of others in my extended family.



This picture is from [A Photographic History of the Civil War in Ten Volumes](#) (Volume 3: "The Decisive Battles") edited by Francis Miller (New York: The Review of Reviews, 1911), a set given to me by a great-aunt sometime around 1960. It shows a Confederate soldier who

had just been killed during the breakout. Notice his lack of shoes, and the bandage or wrapping on one foot. It was a terrible time, especially for the Confederate troops (though the Union ones couldn't have been doing much better).

When I was a kid in Richmond, Indiana and we would play Civil War, I generally had to represent the South alone. Though I did not

approve of the cause of the South (my family had become Quaker, part of a long abolitionist tradition), my family heritage kept me from disparaging its soldiers.

By the time my family moved back to the South in 1961, I had become fascinated by that war, and had learned a great deal about it. I learned more, as we settled into Atlanta and I saw the cyclorama of the Battle of Atlanta in Grant Park—and came across, just outside, twin water fountains, one labeled Whites Only (maybe it wasn't there that I saw them—but I do remember them, and remember the shock of seeing them).

The centennial of the Civil War and the height of the Civil Rights movement quickly became intertwined, to me. The "Forget? Hell!" license plates (showing a tattered old soldier in gray, the Confederate battle flag over his shoulder) were irrevocably yoked in my mind to the death of Medgar Evers and the bombing of that church in Montgomery, Alabama that left four girls dead and more than twenty people injured.

States' rights? Not slavery? Today, on NPR's *Weekend Edition Sunday*, was a [story](#) about a reenactment of Jefferson Davis's swearing-in as president of the Confederacy (and there's also [one](#) in *The New York Times*), an event devoid of mention of slavery. Pride in the South has led to a re-writing of history. The reality is that the issue of states' rights was married to defense of slavery from the time of the Constitutional Convention; the seeds of the Civil War were sown there in Philadelphia (or even earlier, as the authors of [Slave Nation](#) argue)—and not in the establishment of a federal government and diminution of the power of the states, but in the compromises on slavery that satisfied no one.

I respect the memory of my ancestors, but that doesn't mean I have to pretend that the cause they fought for was something other

than it was. Yes, there were other things besides slavery important to the Civil War (most of my ancestors who fought were mountaineers from Western North Carolina, people far too poor to ever have owned slaves), but the war never would have happened, had the peculiar institution not existed.

To me, because the Civil Rights movement and the centennial of the Civil War occurred together, I learned to respect both. For others, the Civil Rights movement destroyed an imagined America—and they took to a revisionist view of the Civil War as an antidote, as a focus for nostalgia for an America that never existed.

To them, if the Civil War hadn't been about slavery in the first place, then the Civil Rights movement needn't have happened—and life could still be like they pretend once it was.

In [Albion's Seed](#), David Hackett Fischer posits four American "folkways" originating in the British Isles. I'm connected with all four, but my affinity is for the Scots-Irish-based Borderer culture—not politically, but certainly socially. I didn't think about it much until I read Jane Smiley's comments on the Borderers in the *Huffington Post* some years ago. That started a process of exploration in my own cultural antecedents that continues today.

Blogographia XX

JANE SMILEY AND THE SCOTS-IRISH

1/1/07 - One of the tricks of my teaching trade has to do with stereotypes. I teach writing, for the most part, and I want my students to be aware of themselves, their own biases, and the biases in the greater culture as they position themselves to compose. So, at the beginning of

the term, I generally make use of an exercise wherein I challenge them to tell me about their assumptions about me from looking at me. "Who am I?" I ask. "What do I do? What do I believe?" My students, generally of diverse backgrounds in terms of nationality, race, and religion, are invariably wrong. Which is my point: though we have to generalize, drawing conclusions from our generalizations is dangerous.

We never know who we might be insulting.

No, we can't see everyone as individuals right off the bat. Remember those people who said, in the sixties, "I don't see race, I see individuals"? They were talking nonsense. Race is a *part* of the individual, as are religion and other ethnic heritages. We start with the easily identifiable every time we meet a person. And it's not just race, but accent, how one dresses—all sorts of things. However, keeping to the generalizations, to draw conclusions about the individual—or even about entire groups of people through generalizations (which generally arise from the more negative traits of individuals within the particular group)—is ill-advised. Though stereotypes may be a necessary starting point, we best move away from them quickly—when they are about groups just as when they are about people.

Why? Because such generalizations, even if they are convenient starting points, are usually wrong....

Smiley is writing about a contemporary group in American culture that she, following Fischer, claims grew out of the Scots-Irish culture in America that early on dominated the region extending from the lower part of western New York State down into northern Georgia and Alabama and even into Mississippi, making up what we call "Appalachia," for centuries one of the poorest regions of the United States. The greater region covers 410 counties, with 96 as the real core.

To be fair, Smiley says that choice of one's culture is based on affinity today, and not heritage—but I don't think she's completely right. She would argue that I'm not part of this culture because I'm educated and teach in New York City. But this, I believe, is actually only a further slam on that culture. *My* culture. Telling me I am no longer a part of it is tantamount to telling an educated African-American that she or he is no longer black....

My point isn't to extol Appalachian culture—even though it is, in many respects, my culture. Yes, I was born "down the mountain," in the piedmont of North Carolina, but much of my family is Appalachian. My ancestors lived in Wilkes County (the birthplace of stock-car racing) from well before the Revolution. On the other side, they lived on the banks of the Ohio River from 1804 almost up to the Great Depression. Though I teach in New York City, my house and home address are in the Appalachian region of central Pennsylvania—where I feel I am really "home" in a way I never will in the city, for mine is an essentially rural culture.

I also have roots in the other three cultures Fischer identifies, the Puritan New England culture (ancestors of mine settled in Connecticut in 1630), the "Cavalier" culture of the Virginia region (another branch was among the early settlers of Baltimore), and the "Quaker" (my parents became Quakers when I was quite young—and I am still a member of the Society of Friends). These three, however, have never faced the disparagement long experienced by those who Fischer calls the "Borderers" (after the border region of Scotland and England, where many of my ancestors began a journey that would take them first to Ulster Plantation in Ireland and then to the colonies). And I have never identified with them culturally as strongly as I do with the "Borderers."

"Poor white trash." That's how many see us, no matter what any of us have done. It began early. Charles Woodmason, a traveling preacher in the hills of South Carolina, wrote a journal that was later published as *The Carolina Backcountry on the Eve of the Revolution* in which he characterizes the people of the region in ways not so different from Fischer and Smiley. By the time of the movie of *Deliverence* in 1972, the stereotype of dirt-eating (perhaps coming from a symptom of hookworm), inbreeding, clannish people was so strongly engrained in our culture that few recognized that they held it.

Even today, attitudes towards Appalachians tend strongly towards the negative. Smiley makes use of that, extending "Borderer" culture to all of those who support George Bush. Because it is so acceptable to poke at the "Hillbillies," Smiley doesn't have to excuse herself, as she might, were she using another ethnic group. We're an easy target—for one thing, we rarely complain.

Stereotyping

A note on stereotyping: I would like to be able to write in detail about my students here. But I can't. Half of them may have African ancestry, but that doesn't make them African American in the sense of being descended from slaves in the States. Many are Caribbean or of Caribbean descent. Others are actually African. Students at City Tech speak over one hundred languages and come from almost as many countries. Some are of traditional college age; others are not. Some know exactly what they want to do while others are following the dictates of their families. It is impossible for me to generalize about them.

Each student has had, and continues to have, experiences unique within the college

population, making it hazardous to assume anything at all concerning their lives. A week or so after the Fall 2010 semester started in late August, a student showed up at my office, apologizing for not having attended class so far. He had had trouble, he said, getting back to the country on time. About to launch into a patronizing lecture on the importance of showing up, I hesitated—and I’m glad I did.

Instead, I gave the student a copy of the syllabus and a brief synopsis of class activities so far. I mentioned that there was an attendance policy and asked that the student be sure to show up for every class, and on time.

“Of course I will, sir. I have never before missed a class or even been late. It is only that I had trouble getting to Islamabad, due to the flooding.”

I was appalled, and glad I had not lectured the student. The floods in Pakistan had been big news for the last month: thousands dead, hundreds of thousands forced from their homes, billions of dollars of damage. When I asked the student what had happened to him personally, he told me he had walked for four days to get to the airport, sleeping in the open and fording swollen streams before reaching a point where public transportation was still running.

Oddly enough, there’s another meaning of “stereotyping” for me, one that goes back to the eighteenth century and that probably led to the modern use of the word.

One of my duties at the small newspaper in the town where I graduated from high school involved melting lead in a large caldron, skimming the dross and then scooping the liquid into a hopper atop an apparatus holding forms for making linotype pigs. These were long bars of lead with a point at one end and a large hole through the other. They would be hooked to a chain at the side of the linotype machine and lowered slowly into a chamber that melted them to create the slugs, the lines of type that would be used on the press.

The apparatus for making the pigs had another use, and that was for creating stereotypes using paper flongs (more like papier-mâché in weight and strength than anything else) that carried an impression on them. Initially, the machine had been used for reproducing entire pages set in type—hence the name of the process, “stereotyping.” When

I was doing it, stereotyping was used most for reproducing photographs and advertising drawings in lead negative for use on our old flatbed presses. I had to be quite careful: If the lead were too hot when I released it from the hopper into the stereotype form, the flong could char and stick to the hardening lead. Then I would have to hope I could scoop it out with a metal router without damaging the image. Unlike the other, creating stereotypes in this way is much more of a craft than one might suppose.

Challenging Students

Every class every semester provides its own challenges through the unique mix of students in each section. It's impossible for me to devise a syllabus that can be followed twice: The needs of each individual group—and each individual in the group—make it necessary to constantly revise goals and assignments. An idea that worked wonderfully one semester will likely fail the next. The only safe course is to try to figure out where the students are at the beginning of the semester and proceed from there. Even then, given the likely range within that group, progress can be haphazard or proceed in completely unexpected directions.

As a teacher in a liberal arts department, I am lucky. The particular goals I set for my classes are less concerned with particular skill-and-knowledge sets than with attitudes toward learning, knowledge, and communication. If I can get my students to want to learn to communicate through the written word, the knowledge they need to do so will be acquired—perhaps with my help, perhaps a little down the road. I work toward those "Aha!" moments when students suddenly realize what this learning game is all about and see that they can actually do it for themselves.

The diversity of City Tech students, as I have said, makes it difficult to talk about them as a group. Writing about individuals among them is one way around this, but there are choices behind the selection that reflect more on me than on the students. Like any teacher,

I tend to focus on the stars unless I am extremely careful. But the stars need less attention than the lesser lights do. Talking about *any* students as individuals is just as problematic. Each carries different barriers to success—or means to assure it. All deserve attention.

Beyond saying that they continually surprise me, I rarely try to describe my students, either as groups or as individuals. Teaching is based heavily in intersections of subjectivities. Any singling out only provides information useful to that unique relationship. Except when it doesn't, of course, or when it does something more. There are plenty of failures in teaching, but each success provides each teacher with new tools to be tried and maybe discarded in the next instance. This is an exhausting process, and it has little to show for itself at the end—except within each student herself or himself. And that might not even be evident for years.

Failing Students

There was only one teacher I liked in all of high school: Robert Board, a tall man with a flattop haircut who taught American Studies, an unusual course in a high school in the 1960s. He told me he knew why I had skipped school the day Woody Guthrie died—but didn't turn me in. He died himself the year after we left Michigan, seated at his typewriter with a recommendation for me for college started but incomplete. Mr. Board knew how to let students learn, forcing nothing. He knew how to encourage.

Unlike most of the rest of Holland High School.

Except one.

One of the history teachers wanted to take me out of class after she realized I'd read the entire text the first week (history was a passion of mine at the time). The school wouldn't allow that: I wasn't doing well enough in my other classes for something that novel even to be considered.

The next semester, I battled a different American history teacher. He was a strident

conservative, a follower of William F. Buckley and a passionate supporter of the Vietnam War. This was the spring of 1968. We argued all semester, and I expected my grade to suffer for it but didn't care.

For the final, he asked us to write an essay explaining five things the United States had done to stop the spread of communism since the end of World War II. Instead, I wrote about five things the U.S. had tried to do but failed. Shocking me, he gave me an "A," I think, probably the only one I earned in high school. Though I hated him at the time (before I saw that "A," certainly), Carl Selover has been my model for dealing with disagreement in the classroom ever since.

Culture Shock

Blogographia XXI

MEMORIES OF APPALACHIA

2/15/07 - Mary Autry's Chevy was a '56 Bel Air. That was significant to me, for even by 1965 the '57 Chevy was known as the class of the fifties automobiles—but, at 13, I didn't want to run quite within the pack. A year older was somehow superior. Even better, in my opinion, for it took a real connoisseur to tell the difference between a '55 and a '56—and I could do it.

In those days, a car a decade old was a relic, but it was all Mary could afford. She worked the serving line in the lunchroom in the elementary school up toward Micaville. She had bought the car used, and probably hadn't paid very much. I bought my own first car almost a decade later for fifty bucks, and I don't think she could have paid much

more. Mine, too, was to be a Chevy Bel Air, a '64. Mary's car wasn't quite the junker mine proved to be, but about the only person who would be impressed by it was a boy just on the young side of puberty, a boy learning the language of engines, though he had yet to change a spark plug, let alone rebuild a carburetor.

My prime memory of that car, however, has nothing to do with its mechanics. It has to do with a frozen pool of blood....

I don't remember why we were chopping wood. Mary's little house, where I was living, was heated by a kerosene stove and had no fireplace. I don't remember a wood stove at all—and I would, having relied on one through the winter two years previously. We had no need for fence posts, for Mary had nothing to fence in—aside from her vegetable garden—and this was the dead of winter. But, nevertheless, my roommate David and I were chopping wood. Mary was around somewhere, probably in the kitchen, but she wasn't paying much attention to us. We'd been given our task; it was up to us to complete it.

The tree I attacked wasn't that big. Oh, it was tall enough, but fairly slender, perhaps with a seven-inch diameter at the base, just big enough to need an axe rather than a saw. It came down easily, but I had left my bow saw down by the house so, instead of fetching it, I began trimming the branches from the trunk with my axe. Not smart. I would swing into the wood and the whole thing would bounce down and up again, my energy reverberating through the branches rather than cutting them. Annoyed, I broke another rule of wood chopping: as I swung again, I stepped forward. The blade of the axe, this time, went through the branch and right into my foot, slicing through my boot like butter.

Mary's house was across a swinging bridge over the South Toe River from the one local paved road. She kept the Chevy on a little pull-

off next to the bridge, right across from a dilapidated one-room building that housed a store (which really was heated by a wood stove). I was bleeding like crazy, but Mary somehow got me across and into the car. About all I remember is looking back at the trail of blood in the snow, and its feel in the remains of my boot—and of watching it pool on the floor of the car as Mary sped me to the nearest doctor, five miles away.

When we came out of his office some hours later, me with my foot bandaged and wrapped and a new pair of crutches, I could do little more than crawl into the car after my crutches, which I shoved awkwardly onto the back seat. Looking down as I sat, I saw that my blood had frozen on the floor.

"Mary, what should we do about that?" I was weak from the pain of the cut that had half severed my little toe and opened up several inches of my foot quite deeply, but was trying not to show it.

She shrugged as she turned the key. "When we get home, lift it out and throw it in the river. Take out the mat, too, and clean it off on the snow."

Mary, not then, not ever, neither showed emotion about the accident nor chastised me for my stupidity. She had done what was needed from the moment I had limped into her sight, following David, who was running to her for help. She had wiped her hands on her apron, shrugged into a coat, and helped me toward the car. I doubt she said a single word to me from the first moment she saw the blood in the distance as I limped toward her until she answered my question as we started home.

She did what was needed in an emergency and then, like a good mountain person, she forgot about it.

When we moved from Indiana to Atlanta in 1961, I had my first experience of culture shock. My father was a college professor in both places, but our neighborhoods were substantially different. Even though there were more professors on SW 5th Street in Richmond than on Chelsea Circle in Atlanta, there was much more of what I now know was a working-class feel in Richmond, something not at all present in suburban Atlanta.

We were a pretty disheveled bunch in Richmond. Our hair was never well-combed—I don't remember anyone carrying a comb—and we were generally found in T-shirts and shorts. All of the boys in Atlanta kept their greased hair neat, often with a flip in front. They wore madras shirts with collars, chinos, and loafers—no sneakers. I was confused, very much the outsider.

By the end of our second year there, I was absolutely miserable.

During the summer after that year, my fifth-grade year, my parents made a deal with Elizabeth Morgan at the Arthur Morgan School to take me even though I was too young and a year away from their starting grade. Because it was a junior high, when we went to Thailand the year after, I had the option of going into eighth or seventh grade. I chose eighth, not surprisingly. I went back to AMS for ninth grade before joining the family again as they moved from Fort Wayne, Indiana (where they'd gone after Thailand), to Holland, Michigan.

Blogographia XXII

BROADENING TEACHING

12/7/10 - Oh, how I wish I'd paid attention!

But I was only seven or eight years old.

My father, John A. Barlow, was an experimental psychologist. Friends and colleagues I remember include B. F. Skinner, Fred Keller, Charles Ferster, and Tom Gilbert. Dad was particularly interested in teaching machines: he was a paid consultant for Field Enterprises (which did a lot of the commercial work on teaching machines and

programmed instruction) and wrote the entry on the subject for their *World Book Encyclopedia*.

By the mid-1960s, my father and almost everyone else involved with teaching machines and programmed instruction had given them up. Under the influence of Keller and his Personalized System of Instruction (PSI), first publicized in his 1968 article “Goodbye Teacher,” PSI—or “Mastery,” as my father preferred to call it—became my father’s passion.

By the end of the sixties, like all of the others who had been so involved with teaching machines, my father had abandoned them completely.

Like the others, he had discovered that effective teaching cannot be done by machines—or, more accurately, not by machines alone or through programmed learning systems. Teachers are needed, as is interaction. As are faces, the faces of people—right in front of the student.

Yes, some people can learn under any circumstances, as long as the information is available to them. For most, though, it takes something more.

It takes motivation.

The teaching-machine people realized that teaching cannot focus on technology, or on any one thing. A good education is based on lectures, on discussions, on reading, on writing, on labs, on getting outside of the classroom (or away from the computer) and on just exploring. PSI isn’t a formula for education, but one tool a teacher can use—should use—among many.

Good teaching requires two things: the ability to motivate and flexibility, the ability to switch from tool to tool given the demands of the particular situation. Something that worked with one group of students

may not work with the next. The good teacher needs to have had enough experience with a variety of teaching methods so that she or he can easily switch from one to another when the situation requires it.

What interests me most about the history of programmed instruction is that its lessons have been largely forgotten. Today, we are so star-struck by digital technology that we forget that nothing is new, really, that we can find things in the past that can inform what we are doing now.

What my father learned was to focus on students, not on teaching aids. He learned to use the aids, but to abandon them, too, when that was warranted. He learned to keep his options open.

What worries me about today's online instruction is that it provides no options, making instruction a packaged whole. That, unfortunately, will only work for a few students, and not every time.

Had I paid more attention to what my father and the others were doing in the 1960s, I might not now be having to try to reconstruct what they learned. Like the rest of us, I have been too caught up in the future. Now, I want to learn more from the past.

Too bad I didn't listen. Could have saved myself some work.

In 2015, I was asked to review a book on teaching machines by someone named Bill Ferster. I laughed; I knew he had to be the son of Charles Ferster and Miriam Gilbert, both of whom had been friends of my parents. Charles Ferster co-wrote a book with Skinner, and my father admired him a great deal. Bill Ferster is the first scholar I've seen who has put contemporary digital educational tools properly within the context of historical movements such as that of programmed instruction.

Hitchhiking

By the time I had walked out from Salzburg to the Autobahn toward Germany, there were already some thirty hitchhikers queued along the cloverleaf. It was early August of 1968, and hitching around Europe was quite the thing to do if you were young. I took my place at the end of the line, slowly moving up during the hot day. Toward dusk, just as many of the people behind me were giving up for the day, a Mercedes stopped and I climbed in, along with a Japanese fellow and a German. The woman driving was headed for Munich itself, my own destination.

I was the last of the passengers dropped off. The woman pulled up at the end of the tram line that would take me downtown. I grabbed my pack, not noticing as the small batch of maps tucked under the top flap slid out. Running to catch the tram, I swung aboard, paid my fare, and collapsed into a seat opposite the second door. I was the only passenger. Standing for ten hours in the sun is more tiring than one might imagine, and I was exhausted. We started up, climbing up a low, long hill, stopping near the top. I was dozing.

Suddenly, I heard a pounding on the folding door opposite me. A woman was outside, gesturing. I looked at her, puzzled. The door opened; she threw in a bundle—my maps—and turned and ran.

And started to scream.

Her Mercedes, driver's door open, had started rolling backward, down the hill. A man jumped from somewhere and stopped the car. The tram driver looked back at me. Sheepishly, I picked up the maps and he started the tram moving.

Blogographia XXIII

FREIRE AND SKINNER, ONCE AGAIN

12/5/11 - The last passages of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and B. F. Skinner's *The Technology of Teaching* are

particularly instructive to those of us exploring ways of improving education today, though they were each writing over forty years ago. Though their approaches are different, they both recognize, with John Dewey and so many others, the importance of both the method and system of education to the success of any society....

Both writers are aware (Freire, of course, concentrating on it more than Skinner) that power imbalances have an impact on education. Both are aware that education cannot be sectioned off from the rest of society, existing and operating in a neutral vacuum somewhere off to the side. And both know that society is formed by the education it forms.

What astonishes me today is that so few in the discussion of reform of education show anything like the same awareness. Even the charter schools, which appear to have the opportunity of creating something radically different, radically effective, fall upon the same old patterns of teacher facing students, of assessment based on measurable outcomes, of imposed pedagogies. Many claim that they are bound by regulations to fit within certain patterns, and that may well be, but my suspicion is that they are stopped more by inertia and lack of imagination.

The danger remains that, by changing education, you change society. And few, and even fewer educators, are willing to face the wrath of a population that, while discontent, countenances little change. Freire's "revolutionary leaders" are not seen as liberators but as simply new (and worse) policemen. There is "absolute power" in education today, but one Skinner would not have imagined, for it's the power to insure that nothing new is tried; it is the power to keep education from any possibility of threatening the status quo, no matter how much that status quo needs to be threatened.

The current movement for educational reform is no such thing.

In fact, it is a movement to make sure that reform never happens. If anything, it is a regressive movement, taking American education back to where it was before Brown v. Board of Education, when there was a two-tiered (multiple-tiered, actually) system in place.

Real reform of education will have to be revolutionary ... or nothing will happen at all and catastrophe will, one day, be upon us.

The young woman had somehow lost her travelling companion. She had wanted to go one way, I guess, and he another. We were both sitting in the courtyard of the youth hostel, me fresh from the showers and she trying to find someone to hitch with to Prague but not having much luck. Wanting to get as far away from Munich as fast as I possibly could, I offered to accompany her once she had explained that we could now get visas at the border.

Our luck getting rides was good—it generally was, when hitching with a woman—and we made it to Linz in Austria while there was still plenty of daylight. Someone offered to give us a ride the few kilometers up to the Czech border and we gratefully accepted. We figured we could easily get to Budějovice that evening and find someplace to stay, so we cheerfully crossed into Eastern Europe and started walking along the road to the north, fully expecting traffic. A ride would certainly soon come by.

It did not. We walked and were passed by a horse cart and a bus or two, nothing more. I think maybe one car did go by, but it did not even slow.

I was used to the frustrations of hitchhiking by that point so was willing to just keep trudging along, but my companion was not. She said she was going to flag down any bus that might come by, and we would take that. OK, sure. I didn't mind. We had changed some money at the border, so had enough for any fare we might have to pay.

A bus finally came. It stopped and we were beckoned aboard. There was no fare to pay, for it was the bus of a group of Jugoslav exchange students heading back to Budějovice

from an outing. They fed us that night, bought us beer and cigarettes, and gave us a room— together. It had two bunk bed sets on opposite walls. She climbed to the top on one side and motioned for me to stay on the bottom of the other. That was fine with me.

The next day, the students, still enjoying the novelty of their American visitors, put us on the train to Prague. I had two books with me, books I had traded for back in Munich: Erich Fromm's *The Sane Society*, which I was loving, and Ayn Rand's *Anthem*, which I already loathed though I was only halfway through. Even then, I recognized the importance of the serendipity of the pairing; ultimately, the distinction between the two outlooks on the world would define both my life and my teaching for the next half-century.

Blogographia XXIV

LET ME PUT THAT IN CONTEXT

7/28/06 - Perhaps one of the side benefits of the blogs will be the re-emergence of the public intellectual. Such people, usually specialists in one field but writing much more generally, once provided a great deal of the context for public debate. You might say that they provided the parameters for the public sphere (if you can stand the alliteration).

Bertrand Russell, Albert Einstein, John Dewey, B.F. Skinner—just to create a random quartet—all had influence on the debates going on in diners and living rooms. In many ways, their influence was greater outside of their areas of expertise, though it was those that gave them the *gravitas* needed in those days in order to be taken seriously elsewhere.

Today's pale imitations of the old public intellectual are not people who have proven themselves in particular pursuits. Chris Matthews, on his *Hardball* TV show in late July, kept telling Ann Coulter that she writes well. So do David Horowitz, George Will, and the dozens of others who have taken upon themselves what really have become

public pseudo-intellectual roles. Unlike the real public intellectuals of bygone years, their achievements rest only on facility of comment. Few of them show accomplishment elsewhere.

The nation's real intellectuals, on the other hand, usually do not have the communications skills that are the base of the pundits' successes. For the last twenty years or more, unable to compete in the public sphere with those media savvy commentators, most of the best of American academics have retreated from debate, happy to speak to each other in small groups on college campuses, but leaving the rest of America to itself—and to discussion defined by people whose only claim to accomplishment is flair with the tools of communications.

It takes practice to work effectively within the public sphere; to become a real public intellectual requires years of work. First, one establishes oneself in a field of expertise. As times goes on, one begins to be able to speak out on other issues, starting with letters to the editor and guest columns in local papers—and talks on campus or in town. Once, these were the proving grounds allowing people to gain experience and dexterity before moving on to greater venues.

With the consolidation of media ownership (not to mention the growing clubishness of the professionals in the media), it became harder and harder for tyro public intellectuals to hone their skills. Only a few of them, when thrown into the media cauldrons of the eighties and nineties, were able to compete with the dapper and assured pseudos like George Will. Seeing what happened to their colleagues, few others bothered to try.

The advent of the blogs, however, has changed things. Now, without fanfare and with minimal risk, anyone (yes, even college professors and other intellectuals) can establish a blog and start learning

how to participate in this new public sphere. Though amateurs in the media, the intellectuals can build upon their real expertise and begin to re-assert themselves in the face of those pundits who, really, have little more to offer than facility with a pen.

One of the most important functions of the public intellectual was to place contemporary debates within a broader cultural and historical context. They weren't looking to convince, but to provide—so they didn't select from history the way too many of the pseudos do, today. One reason they didn't was that they had reputations for probity, and did not want to lose them.

That's the advantage of coming into the public sphere with a reputation already established in intellectual pursuits: one has something to protect, so is a bit more careful with what one says than, say, Ann Coulter or David Horowitz. The reputations of these pseudos come through media only, and not through contributions to any fields of study.

Over the next few years, such pundits should start to find themselves pushed aside, as the Michael Berubes, Todd Gitlins, Juan Coles, and more start to have greater influence within the public sphere, providing a real intellectual background to the debates. The blogs are the perfect arena for the new public intellectuals, for they for a contextual web themselves, something the real intellectuals are quite comfortable working with.

The blogs: providing once again the context for our discussions that public intellectuals gave us in the days before the rise of the professional media punditocracy.

The Unspoken

Some stories are just too damned personal for the classroom—even though they influence how one approaches the individuals in the classroom, especially their own recalcitrance. This is one I rarely mention and that I don't think I've ever written—certainly not in any detail, though those details are as clear to me today as they were in the months following. The story, strangely, doesn't really bother me—but it long perplexed me for I have no idea how best to communicate it. It deals with such a complicated array of issues and concerns that I've never felt comfortable untangling it for anyone else, though I did so, for me, long ago. It was that drawn-out process of examination that left the details bright. It also taught me the value of discretion when asking others to express things about their own backgrounds, especially when teaching. It's not always that they don't want to say, but that it might just be too personally complicated.

The guy I met in the bar, the rapist, taught me a trick with a box of matches. Put a small hole in the top of the box, then take out one match and stand it in the hole, doing so with one hand only while also holding the box in that hand. Then take out another match and light it—still all with one hand. Next, use that match to light the other, the match heads touching so that they fuse, leaving the matchsticks stuck together at right angles. For years, I would show off this trick, but I never, ever told where I learned it.

As I walked along near the main Munich train station after alighting from the tram, I wondered what I should do for the night. It was too late to get a bed at the local youth hostel. I walked into the nearby park and sat down on a bench somewhat hidden by bushes and a turn in the path, hoping I could nap there for a time, realizing I might be walking Munich streets for much of the night—with no place to go until the gates of the youth hostel would open at seven in the morning. The very idea of the hours ahead made me more tired still.

A policeman prodded me after a time, and I got up to walk. I passed around the train station, down a small street where I saw a bar crowded with drinkers. I had enough cash for a

beer, so I went in. I found a seat in a hidden corner, sipped my drink, and smoked one of my few remaining cigarettes. Two men started arguing by the bar. One pushed the other and the other pushed back. Suddenly, they both had knives and people stumbled back out of their way. After they had feinted at each other a couple of times, each was grabbed from behind and hustled outside.

When I turned my attention back to my table, a man was seated across from me. On discovering that I spoke little German, he smiled broadly and spoke to me in English. We chatted for a time; he showed me a wallet full of money and he learned that I had no place to go. He invited me back to his room, where I could sleep. Foolishly, I agreed.

It was a single room with a single bed in an elevator building with a bathroom down the hall. When he finally fell asleep, sated, I crept into my clothes as quietly as I could, scared of waking him, and slowly opened the door. The light from the hallway fell on his wallet on the floor, bills spilling from it. I was tempted to sweep them up and take it all, but the idea passed quickly. I just wanted to be out of there and away from him. I don't think I could have spent the money; handling it would have made me shake.

The gates of the youth hostel finally swung open—I'd been waiting across the street since leaving the apartment. I couldn't register until later, I knew, not until after twelve, but all I wanted was a shower stall. It cost money for hot water and I had no coins, but I didn't mind. All I wanted to do was wash him away, which I did, over and over again.

Listening to Ourselves

What does that mean to me now? Not much. It was a long time ago and whatever impact it had on me has folded back into the greater continuum of an unfolding life. What I do keep in mind is that effects are clearer the closer you are to them, though perhaps not comprehensible—though, perhaps, you don't even want to look at them or at the event

causing them. But the impact is yours personally, to share or explore in your own way and on your own time. It's certainly not up to a classroom teacher to force you to face the incidents in your life that, to say the very least, you would rather not have had happen. I don't believe in "trigger warnings" or in "civility" as the terms are being used on campus so often today (as a means of avoiding certain topics), but I do believe in both respect and privacy—and that should be enough.

Blogographia XXV

ACADEMIC AUDIENCES

3/18/12 - Just who should we—academics, that is—be talking to? Be writing for?

Sometimes, admittedly, our conversations assume a great deal of background. Sometimes, that's even necessary. In too many of these cases, however, that background itself narrows consideration of possibilities and angles. It keeps away everything outside of the "wisdom" passed down in graduate school or in conferences of narrow focus or through books and journals aimed so explicitly towards "the few." In other words, speaking and writing only to those who share the background we have in a specialty restricts the conversation—and in more ways than one.

That's why I love the Ray Davis [comment](#) on a post of mine the other day:

Whenever anyone asks me about academic publishing, I think of [E. B. White's polite demurral](#): "Nothing would delight me more than to write exclusively about sheep, exclusively for shepherds. But...."

I mean, what's the point? If we all already have had the same

experiences and, fundamentally, agree about the main theses of our fields, why are we talking to each other? Wouldn't you say we need to get out more?

The other day, I asked someone who is putting together a scholarly anthology if she might be interested in a particular approach to the topic. It was rather a long shot, for what I proposed proposing (I wasn't going to write a proposal for a chapter if there were no interest—and I suspected there would not be) involved a re-examination of certain fundamentals relating to the Comp/Rhet field. I got a nice email back declining ... nice, except that it included this statement: "scholars in rhetoric and composition have a pretty firm grasp on why these claims can be made."

Oh, my. I'd somehow missed that the book was to be for specialists only. Furthermore, whenever "scholars" feel they have a "firm grasp," it is past time that the "why" be looked into anew. The statement the editor made reeks, to me, of a self-congratulatory and sedentary field (which, actually, Comp/Rhet is not), one that is satisfied that the insiders really have a handle on things, thank you very much. The editor is a good person, I am sure, and a fine scholar. She comes out of an excellent program and her own dissertation director is a nationally recognized figure. But she has narrowed her focus so (for the proposed book, at least) that the only audience will be the few approaching the topic from a narrow Comp/Rhet viewpoint. This is disappointing from any scholar, but from someone with a background in rhetoric and in composition, it is a particular letdown.

What's the use of writing for so few? In my broad field of cultural studies, there is diminished interest in speaking only to those within the specialty. In fact, most of us like to dive into other fields and to try to pull audiences from outside into our discussions. That's part of why I *like*

being in cultural studies, for it keeps me in touch with all sorts of things I would miss, were I working in a field where only a narrow group of “experts” are welcome.

And what’s the use of an “expert,” anyway? I would say that an expert is only valuable insofar as she or he brings that expertise outside of the ivory tower... not a new claim, by the way, but one of the underpinnings of arguments for academic freedom as made for a century now, as the [AAUP’s 1915 Declaration](#) clearly shows.

An academic who only writes for other academics only writes for himself or for herself. Each one of us should really be looking for ways, in our writing certainly, but in many other venues as well, to expand knowledge of what we are doing within populations that might not already be parts of our conversations.

Just as there are some tales we share rarely, there are some stories we all have told too often and in too many different ways. The story about the elephant that let me live is one such. I am sick of it, though I can’t help returning to it. I mean, how many times have I felt death gaining on me so immediately? Perhaps when I got my ankles run over by the “holey heap,” that jeep at the Arthur Morgan School when I was a kid. But not many others. Anecdotes become our stock-in-trade, especially when we are teachers. We need to take care with them, never overusing them and not letting them evolve through the telling.

There was another tale in Africa, four-and-a-half years before my encounter with the elephant. This one I’ve also told and written too often, but I generally laugh it off as I do, and I don’t use it in the classroom. I mean, how could I really have thought someone was taking me off to shoot me? Oh, come on! Don’t be dramatic. What would my students think if I told them *that*?

We had gotten stuck in a town under attack, Bob Dunbar and I had. It was Christmas 1985, and we were trying to get to Bankass in Mali from Ouahigouya in Burkina Faso. The first bombs stopped our trip. We went back to our hotel and checked in again. I got drunk that night (as usual); I'm not sure if Bob did. The next day, we decided it best to go back to Ouagadougou and were on our way to find transportation when more bombs fell. We eventually got out, but only thanks to luck.

At one point, we thought we were being taken out into the bush to be shot, but merely hadn't been able to see the compound we were being escorted to. It was an extraordinarily scary little march, but I don't think either of us talked about it much, afterwards. We had both heard the story of the journalists who had boated across Lake Victoria to Idi Amin's Uganda—only to be escorted politely from the water and then quickly shot. We, fortunately, were simply led on. After showing our passports again at the compound, we were told to wait under a tree.

We sat, and a new round of shooting started.

Something rustled through the leaves over our heads.

One of us said, "Those are bullets." We dove to the side of a building a few meters away. A soldier stopped spraying the sky with bullets from his AK-47 long enough to laugh at us.

A couple of Dutchmen in a pickup truck gave us our ride out later that day. If we had been Africans, I don't think we would have been able to leave at all, except on foot.

Blogographia XXVI

TUAREGS

1/15/08 - The first Tuaregs I saw were shadowy figures in long robes, sometimes wearing turbans, trying to sell cheap, blunt swords and knives sheathed in leather, cassette cases and other boxes, also leather covered, and jewelry made in imitation of what I would later find to be desert finery. Most of the bars I frequented in Ouagadougou were

separated from the street only by low walls (if that), and the Tuaregs would glide up to the table, never making eye contact, laying out their wares until the bar owners shooed them away.

They were lighter skinned than most of the Burkinabe, with hair a lot straighter. Later, I would imagine them somehow related to the Roma of Europe, for they aren't much darker and are also nomadic. The Tuaregs I saw in Ouaga, or so I was told, could not really go home again—except to purchase more tourist geegaws—for they had abandoned the traditional life.

They had done so, usually, of necessity.

It was a time of drought, or just the end of it. Worldwide attention had been focused on the area just a year earlier, with the first Live Aid concert of 1984. Things were better, but not much more so.

In March of 1986, a friend named Brent and I decided to go up to Tombouctou overland. The Niger River was now too low for the boats, and the first truck of the season—a Land Rover—was going to take up the mail instead, defining a new road for the season over what had been, until the week before, submerged land.

The only foreigners in the Land Rover were the two of us and a Japanese man who was planning on buying a camel and joining a caravan across the desert. Everyone else was Malian.

For some reason, I ended up sitting right next to the 55-gallon drum holding spare gasoline. It had not been sealed well; at any good bump, gas sprayed up and over me. Add to that the dust that flew in from the open back, and I was soon quite a sight.

When we got to Niafunké (the home, though I did not know it then, of guitarist Ali Farka Touré), two of the Tuaregs motioned for me to follow them. I did, and they took me to a market stall and quickly

made a deal for a long swath of loosely woven, synthetic cloth—which I still have.

One of them tied it into a turban around my head, undid it, and ordered me to do it myself. It took a couple of times, but I soon could do myself up “like a Tamacheck,” as he said. Back in the truck, I imitated



them and covered my face with the loose end of the turban that had hung in front of my right shoulder, draping the rest over my left shoulder and down my back. The two men who had helped me nodded when I had it correctly in place and ignored me for the rest of the journey.

Though the gas still splashed and the dust continued to swirl, my lips and nose were now protected—and the turban proved surprisingly cool.

Over the next week in the desert, I learned to love that turban. I took it back with me to Ouaga, and it returned to Africa with me some years later when I joined Peace Corps. It folds quite small, though it’s over two meters long, is light, and takes little space.

While we were in Tombouctou, Brent and I hired a couple of camels and Tuareg guides to visit one of the nomad encampments outside of town. The guide (it was his encampment we went to) said they weren’t really nomads any longer, for they had no goats. No more was there vegetation enough to support them away from the wells of the few towns—and they weren’t welcome in the towns. He showed us his garden with disgust and resignation, telling us this was no way for a Tuareg to live.

Below is a picture I took at that Tuareg encampment, colored a bit with pencil a couple of years later:



Tuareg resilience is legendary for a reason. People of the desert—the whole desert—they had been parceled into a number of countries, including Mali, Algeria, Niger, and even Burkina Faso, though feeling allegiance to none. Hit hard by the drought of the eighties and stung by governments reluctant to recognize their nomadic ways, it looked like the Tuaregs were a vanishing people. It seemed as though they would drift to the cities, abandoning their traditional lifestyle, selling trinkets and even begging. Yet that is not what happened. Not completely, at least.

For a while, it seemed as though the Tuareg had decided instead to go out in a blaze of gunfire, fighting the governments of Mali and Niger. While that may still happen, the Tuareg are getting smart. They are taking a lesson from those who have been selling pale imitations of their art (the cross of Agadez, as a silver pendant, can now be seen almost anywhere in the world) and are using their culture to reach the rest of the world as something other than supplicants. The desert

may no longer be able to support them, but the skilled artisans and musicians among them just might.

And, the Sahara being the Sahara, not many are going to want to move in on them, as they disappear back into the sands, having stocked up on necessities through trade.

That Which Matters

In *Requiem for a Nun*, William Faulkner puts these words into the mouth of one of his characters: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." This has become one of his most famous lines—and one that not only encapsulates much of his own writing, but the lives of all of us. For me, it also colors how I should approach the classroom. It is not a place existing in some sort of timeless space beyond our normal lives, but is a part and confluence of a variety of lives and experiences.

Blogographia XXVII

TRUTH AND MEDIA

3/2/15 - On June 24, 1968 (I know the date thanks to [Wikipedia](#)), I walked from the Capitol in Washington, DC to the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) headquarters at 14th and U with a bunch of SCLC activists. Only three of us on the small march were white and I was just a sixteen-year-old kid.

By the way, I've never told the whole of this, I don't think. The incident was both embarrassing and confusing—and I didn't know how to present it. I am writing about it now because I am intrigued by the Brian

Williams and Bill O'Reilly kerfuffles recently (I have written on the topic [here](#) and [here](#)), situations which bring up questions of memory, honesty, and journalistic integrity. The question here is, "Does what we have witnessed make us better reporters? Does it improve our understanding?" Also, "Do we learn more from what we actually see and interpret for ourselves than from, say, photographs or news clips." Or Wikipedia (I would have thought the incident I relate below happened earlier in June). This last comes up through O'Reilly's claims about what he saw in Northern Ireland [decades ago](#): "a Fox News spokesman said that O'Reilly was not an eyewitness to any bombings or injuries in Northern Ireland. Instead, he was shown photos of bombings by Protestant police officers."

How much of my memory is influenced by what I saw on TV that night in 1968, or read in the newspaper the next day?

When we got to the SCLC headquarters, the streets were teeming with angry people. A group of us went into the drug store next door to get something to drink at the lunch counter. It was packed in there, too. We squeezed into the last available seats and I asked only for a glass of water—I had no money but was thirsty from the walk in the hot sun. As I was drinking, I noticed a young man instructing a kid, who came up to me and asked for money. I said, sorry, I haven't any. He went back and the young man then came over and yelled, "He called my brother a n****r!" and slugged me in the face.

The SCLC people I was—well trained—immediately surrounded me and hustled me out of there and into the headquarters next door—where the other two whites were sitting, talking with various volunteers. Someone gave me a paper towel to wipe the blood from my face and somebody else said they needed to get the three of us out of there, that the police were beginning to barricade the streets and that

no one would be safe, particularly white people, if the police started anything. A phalanx was formed around us and we were escorted out the back door and past the forming lines of police.

I think I had my first smell of tear gas soon after.

[Wikipedia](#) says: "On the afternoon of June 24, police reported being hit with rocks near 14th St. & U St., an intersection central to [April disturbances](#) following the King assassination. Broken windows and a fire bomb were also reported. One hundred police in riot gear responded with tear gas. The area was sealed off, a curfew was declared, and Mayor Washington declared a state of emergency. 450 National Guardsman began patrolling the streets that night, and few incidents were reported (one man leaving a liquor store was wounded by a police officer's bullet)."

My mother, when I got back to where we were staying farther out, on 16th St., asked why I was bleeding. I said I fell down.

All of us who write, or talk, might be a little more mindful that we start editing our stories even as they happen. I knew I couldn't tell my parents the truth, not then, for I felt like a complete idiot and a victim, and I did not want to appear that way, certainly not to them. Our stories change due to audience, circumstances and age. Now, almost fifty years later, I can tell this rather trivial story without embarrassment.

But what about it should be believed—by me or anyone else?

Williams, and all "real" journalists, need to be asking this all the time, and thinking about our answers continually. O'Reilly, who just plays a journalist on TV, doesn't really have to. But, for his own particular sense of integrity, maybe he should want to.

Why was I embarrassed by being slugged? Why did it take years for me to tell anyone I had been raped? These are questions many victims ask as they wonder about their own culpability—look at the victims of domestic violence.

A friend of mine was drinking with a friend of hers, who was recounting her own rape experience—this was more than thirty years ago. My friend asked, “What the hell were you doing *there* and dressed like *that*?” Her friend took the pitcher of beer from the table and poured it over her head.

How much is it our responsibility for being in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or the right place at the right time, for that matter? I don’t have answers, of course, but I know I need to be careful when approaching the emotions surrounding personal experiences. Even when we know, intellectually, that we aren’t at fault in a particular situation, we also know that our own actions could have averted it. That can place us in a precarious emotional situation.

Campus Respect

In “Idiot Wind,” Bob Dylan sings, “You’ll never know the hurt I suffered nor the pain I rise above / And I’ll never know the same about you, your holiness or your kind of love / And it makes me feel so sorry.” Perhaps that, as much as anything, is why I’ve always been a reader, a writer, and a teacher. There are barriers we just can’t cross, things about others that we’ll never know. Language, though, can provide an approximation, books a caricature that we can guess behind. It’s an abundant world. Yet, without attention to words, we see no more of it than its simple surfaces.

My teaching and my writing—the two things that dominate my image of myself as a “cultural scholar”—arise not from things I learned in classrooms or on campuses, though those certainly have helped. They arise, really, from the life I’ve lived and from the people who made that life possible, for good and for bad. One of my favorite aspects of American

higher education is the fact that students graduate having taken courses from as many as forty different professors, forty different sets of experiences, forty different collections of knowledge.

What's so wonderful is that this diversity, in combination with each student's own iconoclastic background, brings about a myriad of educations, each as important as the next and together the foundation of functioning democracy. I love, if I may be allowed my naiveté, feeling that I participate. I love that my personal subjectivity can meld with that of a student, creating those necessary twin rails for laying track in a new direction.

Blogographia XXVIII

THE Two BROOKLYNS

7/9/12 - Or three. Or four. Whatever.

When my parents moved to Brooklyn in 1970, I was in college. My experience of the borough had come through visits to my aunt and uncle,



who lived off Grand Army Plaza, first on the east side of it and later on the Park Slope side. My parents bought a brownstone in a middle-class enclave between Crown Heights and Prospect Park called Lefferts Manor, a mile or so south of my aunt and uncle. I spent a few months there the next summer, taking a couple of classes at Brooklyn College. A year later I was back, working for four summer months in Manhattan.

It wasn't until 1975 that I lived and worked in New York City on my own, taking an apartment in an Italian neighborhood called Carroll

Gardens because it was cheap and close to the F train. Leaving in 1976, I returned in 1978, staying for about eight months. In 1988 I was back again for a few months before entering Peace Corps but it wasn't until 1992 that I decided to make a real commitment to Brooklyn. I bought a house across the street from my mother's (my father had died the year before) and took a job at a Quaker school for a year before a couple of partners and I opened up Shakespeare's Sister back in Carroll Gardens, which had become something of a coming, trendy neighborhood. Later, I would bounce back and forth a bit between Pennsylvania (where I had bought another house) and Brooklyn, but was never away for more than a week at a time.

Today, I live in a neighborhood called Marine Park and work downtown, traversing the borough daily by bus and subway. We're here because we can have a house and yard (we have lots of pets and do love the flowers), but it is, in many ways, isolated from what has brought Brooklyn such cachet over the past decades. We can't get into Manhattan (or anywhere) easily, there is no elegant architecture around, and the trendy youth culture of Williamsburg and, yes, even Carroll Gardens hasn't even a clue that we exist.

Today, in the *New York Times*, an [article](#) ran titled "As Brooklyn Gentrifies, Some Neighborhoods Are Being Left Behind." Now, I might complain that one cannot be left behind when one never was expected on the express—or even wanted to be on it, but I won't. The *Times*, after all, sees itself as the center and the motion that everyone aspires to. There's no way I am going to convince anyone there that some of us never wanted to get on their train, so I won't even try.

Though I do like what has happened to Brooklyn over the past twenty years, it's not the only Brooklyn or even what Brooklyn should be.

This is a huge, diverse borough. That the trendy Brooklyn gets the press doesn't mean that it is the best of Brooklyn. We get better bagels here than anyone will find in Park Slope and the best Italian restaurant that I know of isn't anywhere near the trendy neighborhoods, but sits in Dyker Heights (it is called [Tommaso's](#)). Plus, we are close to Coney Island and the little minor-league park where the Cyclones play ... much cheaper and, frankly, as much fun as the majors.

Left behind? Nah. Just a different track.

The Seafarer

When I was in graduate school, early on in my studies, I decided to take the Old and Middle English language sequence. Still relatively new to graduate studies, I had not yet gained the skills of self-protection that become natural to experts in the process. Also, I had no knowledge at all of Anglo-Saxon and no idea what an inflected language was. My pronunciation was horrible and my grasp of the grammar tenuous at best—even as the semester progressed.

Early in the semester, I asked, "At what point could it be said that the transition from Old to Middle English had been made?" The entire class burst out laughing, led by the professor. "1066, of course," she said. I clamped my teeth: the image of the English suddenly switching language as the Conqueror rode victorious from Hastings was too ludicrous for response.

Though I felt alone in the class and least able to master the language, I loved what I was reading. One of the poems we read struck me forcefully. It is called "The Seafarer." At the time, I had no idea that Ezra Pound had done a modern rendering of it. I translated a part of it, just for myself. Reading my translation again, it seems a perfect ending for this piece:

"The Seafarer"

Allow my singing of myself a song telling true,
telling the tales of my trials, of how through affliction's days,
those times of hardship, I suffered often,
bitter grief of heart was given to endure;
of how I experienced, aboard ship in many sorrowful places,
terrible tossing of waves. There aboard I would often hold
an anxious night-watch at the prow of the ship
as it beat along the cliffs. The cold's pinch
was upon my feet, frost was binding them
with chilling chains; there that care I lamented,
hate surrounding my heart, hunger tearing from within
my sea-weary spirit. Of such does a man not know
to whom on this earth ease does befall:
how I wretchedly watched those waters icy cold,
winter inhabiting, away from friend and kin,
icicles hanging about me, hailstorms flying.
There I heard nothing but the harsh sea,
the ice-cold wave. Once in a while the wild swan's song
brought me pleasure; the gannet's cry
and the sound of the curlew replaced the laughter of man;
the singing of the seagulls was the stand-in for mead-drink.
Storms beat upon the tattered cliffs: there to them the tern cried,
that icy-feathered one; frequently there the eagle screamed,
that dewy-feathered one; but not a single helping kin
might this forlorn spirit find for comfort.

Assuredly they believe little, those who life's joys
experience in cities with few adversities
exultant and wine-wanton, how weary I often
in that sea-way should go.

Darken the shadow of night: from the norward snowing;
hoarfrost binding the ground; hail falling to earth
in coldest kernel! I am now indeed called
by the thoughts in my heart that a wretch such as I the sea's
tumultuous salted waves should try,
prompting my mind's desire, on each occasion,
for my spirit to travel that I can go far from here,
as a foreigner coming to a new country.

Assuredly there is none so proud throughout earth,
nor one so happy in his gifts or in health of youth so proud,
nor one in deed so brave or so devoted to his lord,
that he never a sea-voyage of such sorrow had,
as that his Lord willed he take.

The harp is not on his mind, nor is the receiving of rings,
nor delight in women, nor this world's hope,
nor will he think on anything else except the rolling waves;
but always will have anxiety, that which at sea directs one's course.

Groves are adorned with blossoms as towns are decked,
their meadows beautifying them; but the world hastens onward:
all that urges to ready minds
the spirit of journey, that which is so planned
on ocean's path to go far away.

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