Portrait of a Teacher: Stories That Won’t Go Away

by

Peter James Hill

B.S.W. (Social Work), University of British Columbia, 1976

P.D.P. (English Education), Simon Fraser University, 1987

M.Ed. (English Education), University of British Columbia, 1998

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ABSTRACT

Teachers tell stories—whether it’s Little Red Riding Hood in a kindergarten class or Hamlet in English 12. It’s a teacher’s job, especially an English teacher’s job, to tell stories to students. To write the stories teachers tell each other is difficult enough, but there are other stories a teacher secretly tells him or herself year after year that are more difficult to tell. Deep in the recesses of a teacher’s memory, these stories persevere and occasionally surface. These too are instructive and go to the heart of what it means to teach. This thesis explores the relationship between these stories and how a teacher understands his/her practice. Using autoethnography as a method, these autobiographical memoirs are told first as artistic expressions, and then analyzed to tease out patterns in the author’s pedagogical development. The implication for other teachers is that they can tell their own “stories that won’t go away” and, in doing so, question the way they teach their own students. The first chapter of the dissertation discusses the use of autoethnography as a methodology for telling these stories. The second chapter includes 13 stories and three poems about my development as a student and a teacher. The third and last chapter reflects on these stories and traces the patterns behind the stories to see how they affect me as a teacher.
PREFACE

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Peter Hill.

While many of the stories are based on factual events, the names of all the characters have been changed except that of the author. As an autoethnographic study involving retrospective reflection, this work did not require ethical review.
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Next, I want to thank my friend, Larry Wolfson. He was a great help throughout this PhD as we went on long walks discussing baseball and academe. He went before me into this brave new world and showed me it could be done. I’d like to thank my good friend Paul Cowhig who appears in one form or other throughout these stories.

I also want to thank all my fellow PhD students and professors for their support. I especially want to acknowledge Ryan Deschambault whose advice and wisdom were always helpful.

I'd like to thank my daughter Caitlin for her great typing and putting up with me waking up far too early in the morning. I also want to thank my mother, Mary Hill, who, although no longer with us, guided and encouraged me throughout.

Finally, I'd like to thank my wife Pam—Il miglior fabbro (the better craftsman), my chief editor, inspiration, song-singer and straight shooter, always. I dedicate this thesis to her.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation. Graham Greene, 1980, p.211.

Teachers tell stories; from Little Red Riding Hood in a kindergarten class to Hamlet in English 12, it's a teacher’s job, especially an English teacher’s job, to tell stories to students. Teachers also tell stories to each other, in the staff room, on the way to coffee, or over a beer on a Friday afternoon. Stories are told at the Christmas lunch and during retirement speeches at end of the year. Teachers tell stories about themselves, students, parents, and administrators.

I imagine this is true of every job, as workers of every stripe tell stories to each other. However, teaching provides such rich raw material that new stories emerge every day. Teachers tell stories at lunch about events that happened that morning. This rich interaction of story making occurs because of the variety of students and teachers—whether they are young or old, rich, poor or middle class, gay, or straight, Chinese, Persian, African, or Caucasian. Different kinds of students arrive in waves every year and interact with different kinds of teachers. The stories that emerge from these interactions are as varied, and yet as regular, as waves on an ocean shoreline.

Stories emerge while going for coffee with my fellow teachers. We go for a short walk and, even though it is lunch, we call it “going for coffee.” It's about getting away from the school building. This includes getting away from other teachers, students, and
administrators. It’s the best time of the day. It’s when stories surface. We always preface the most salacious stories with a warning dubbed the “cone of silence,” that is, not to be repeated to anyone. If the information is ‘top secret’ we call it a ‘triple’ or ‘quadruple’ cone of silence. (These cones invariably come off once we return to school as the information is shared with other teachers.) We invoke the cone of silence only to get our interest up. The trip for coffee is the chrysalis of the story; it’s where stories begin, where laughter begins. Oftentimes on our return from coffee, students suggest that the teachers have been taking drugs other than caffeine because our moods have changed so radically.

Some stories are ephemeral and last only a day; they are told once and then disappear. Other stories last decades. One reason for the longevity of some is the degree of irony or absurdity in the story. The weirder, the more ironic the story, the longer it lasts. These are rarely didactic and aren't about how well the teacher taught the metaphor or the digestive system. The tale might be pedagogical for a moment, but soon it moves back to the absurd. Examples of these types of stories might include the teacher that wore the same mauve Mumu for seven days in a row, or the parent who said her child couldn't write because his hands were too big, or the sexual harassment workshop that went terribly wrong.

Darker still are the stories about strikes, sexual abuse and mental breakdowns. Are these stories important? Perhaps, because they have become iconic. Despite their absurdity, many of these stories suggest a deep morality and go to the heart of the mystery of teaching. Camus (1955) often commented on absurdity in the world:

I said that the world is absurd, but I was too hasty. This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this
irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart. (p. 3)

In an attempt to echo my own “wild longing for clarity,” I sometimes tell my own absurd stories to my students. Often, a story from my past comes out of nowhere and becomes a teachable moment. For some reason, the students listen. Frank McCourt writes about the same technique in his memoir, *Teacher Man* (2005). He is amazed to find that his students are interested in his stories. He compares himself to the Irish seanachie—a traditional storyteller that went from town to town, admired and patronized by the villagers. McCourt transferred this tradition from Ireland to his classroom in the Bronx. His students listened more to his stories than any other part of his teaching. Inspired by their interest, McCourt decided to write them down when he retired. When asked why it took so long for him to finally write some of these stories down, he responded,

> I was teaching, that’s what took me so long. When you teach five high school classes a day, five days a week, you’re not inclined to go home to clear your head and fashion deathless prose. After a day of five classes, your head is filled with the clamour of the classroom. (McCourt, 2005, p. 3)

There is some truth to this. How can a working high school teacher find the time to put down in print any kind of artistic expression without the ‘clamour’ getting in the way? Once having stilled the noise to write them, is it possible to send the stories out to a wider audience? Even more daunting, can a teacher turn his/her stories into academic research?

Clandinin and Connelly (1994) have examined storytelling in educational research for years through an approach they call “narrative inquiry.” They stress the power of re-telling stories and their ability to educate.
People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young and those, such as researchers, who are new to their communities. (p. xxvi)

In *Narrative Inquiry* (2000), Clandinin and Connelly give credit to John Dewey for this narrative turn toward storytelling. It is Dewey’s stress on the word ‘experience’ that Clandinin and Connelly (1994) use as a starting point:

For Dewey, experience is both personal and social. Both the personal and the social are always present. People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot only be understood as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context. The term experience helps us think through such matters as an individual child’s learning while also understanding that learning takes place with other children, with a teacher, in a classroom, in a community and so on. (p. 2)

Borrowing from Dewey’s theory, Clandinin and Connelly (1994) feel that one way to capture educational experience is through the telling of stories.

To write down the stories teachers tell each other might capture one form of this experience, but there are other stories teachers know—these are the personal stories a teacher secretly tells him or herself year after year. These are the stories that won’t go away. Deep in the recesses of a teacher’s memory, certain stories remain in the mind and occasionally surface. These too are instructive and go to the heart of what it means to teach. As I feel that my time to write some of my stories is fading, I’d like to bring some out into the open.
The purpose of this thesis is to show how autobiographical writing can assist a teacher in understanding his or her practice. Using autoethnography as a methodology, my autobiographical memories are told first as stories, and then analyzed to tease out patterns related to my pedagogical development. The implication for other teachers is that they can tell their own “stories that won’t go away” and, in doing so, question the way they teach.

Each decade has stories about teaching that are particular to that time and place. But these stories are often lost when a teacher retires or leaves the profession. All those years of teaching, the changing dynamics of each year, each Kennedy assassination, or September eleventh somehow fades with every teacher that retires. Each teacher that leaves the profession takes the interaction of the times with him/her. Can nothing more be learned from decades of stories? In my own experience, I wonder why some stories have stayed with me over time, while others fade away. If all goes right, I should retire next year. Already I hear voices asking if any of it was worth it. Is there anything worth remembering? What will happen to all the teaching I did, or all that knowledge I amassed? Does it disappear, as Shakespeare puts it in The Tempest and, “leave not a wrack behind”?

This dissertation will trace some of my educational experiences with the aim of better understanding my own practice but also to keep some memories alive. I also hope that by trying to honestly tell stories about how a life in education affected me, other teachers might feel encouraged to do the same. The first section of stories is mostly narrative and the second section includes reflections on what the stories mean to me. The stories range from when I was 16 years old to the present time.
I’ve subtitled this thesis ‘Stories That Won’t Go Away’ because they have collected in my memory for over 40 years. Some are violent, some absurdly comic. To me, they all say something about education. I’m suggesting that education be considered in the broadest possible terms; that is, these stories take place within educational settings, but are not confined to teaching.

Much of my life, for better or for worse, has occurred in this kind of setting. I was in school for 12 years, followed immediately by four years of an undergraduate degree in Social Work. I had a number of jobs after that, but most circled back to education. I have been a high school teacher since 1987 and since that time, have taught over 4,000 students. If one thinks of an average of four classes a day, that works out to roughly 20,000 high school classes. I received a Master’s Degree and have also taught several classes at the university level. Now I’m working on my Doctorate. I think it’s fair to say that my life has been surrounded by things “educational.” My stories emerge from that life and, for a variety of reasons, have stayed with me. However, these are not stories about how well I taught the metaphor or the right way to use rubrics. There are thousands of articles in educational journals that fulfill that function. Instead, these stories trace my own experiences in education and how they create a portrait of a certain kind of teacher. One way to describe these educational moments is as epiphanies—incandescent moments that leave a lasting effect on the person experiencing them. By documenting these stories, I also will reflect on why they have retained a permanent place in my memory. My hope is that some of my personal experiences may resonate with the experiences of other teachers. As Sparkes (1996) suggests, “I attempt to take you as the reader into the
intimacies of my world. I hope to do this in such a way that you are stimulated to reflect upon your own life in relation to mine” (p.467).

I am under no illusion that these narratives are written with absolute accuracy. Time, memory, and social censorship have altered some of the details. But my overall goal is to try to represent them as honestly as I can. One of the few gifts I have left is memory. That being said, I would like to trace these events and analyze what these stories say about me and about education. I am also interested in my intention in telling certain stories.

One might wonder why this isn’t a study about other teachers’ stories. Why not use a less subjective form of ethnography to tell them? This is a tempting approach, but there is a ‘siren call’ about my own memories. Whenever a good story is told, often someone will say, “You should write that down.” But just as often, these stories are never written. What I’m doing is finally writing some of them down. I may not be able to ask others to fully remove their cones of silence, but I can ask that of myself.

The Truth

The challenge of this type of enterprise is to attempt to tell the truth and make it risky enough to be of interest to the reader. The great memoirist David Sedaris has the following “truth guideline” for his stories:

I've always been a huge exaggerator, but when I write something, I put it on a scale.

And if it's 97% true, I think that's true enough. I'm not going to call it fiction because 3% of it isn't true. (Sedaris, 2008, par. 2)

Some of my own “97% true” stories would have been too revealing for me to publish as a younger teacher. But at 60 years of age, I try to follow Robertson Davies’ (1970) wise
words from Fifth Business, “You’re too old a man to keep secrets” (p. 204). I hope then that these will be my ‘cone of silence’ stories- ones that tell a secret or two, and, at the same time reveal something about education.

Artistic Inspiration

I am inspired by five great writers—William Wordsworth, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Simone de Beauvoir, and George Orwell. All five wrote from their life experiences; all five took important moments from their lives and put them on paper.

Wordsworth

Aside from nature, Wordsworth’s great subject was himself. This didn’t take away from his deeply held philosophies concerning the natural world and human imagination. Nevertheless, to write a very long poem (The Prelude, 1805) purely on the topic of his own poetic development was a brave stance in 1800. Burns, Blake, and Gray had hinted at it, but with true Romantic fervour, Wordsworth immersed himself in it. He also believed that if one experiences something deeply, and shares the experience through writing, others will respond with similar feelings. One of Wordsworth’s great philosophical notions was what he called, “spots of time” or remembered moments. He first used the term in the 12th book of The Prelude:

There are in our existence spots of time,
Which with distinct pre-eminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence …our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired . . .
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on,
May scarcely see at all; and I would give,
While yet we may, as far as words can give,
Substance and life to what I feel, enshrining,
Such is my hope, the spirit of the Past
For future restoration. (Wordsworth, p. 302-303)

He recorded these “spots of time,” to “give life to the spirit of the past.” For Wordsworth, these epiphanies were almost always inspired by nature—whether when he was ice-skating, gathering nuts, or encountering a huge shadow on a dark lake. He also believed that one could be healed through recollection. This notion is found in his other poems as well. In “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” he writes how his heart “dances with the daffodils” long after he sees them by the side of the lake. In a less well-known poem, “The Solitary Reaper,” Wordsworth uses the same concept of restoration through memory. After listening to a young woman singing while working in a field, he relates how the experience will nourish his imagination for years to come, “Whate’er the theme, the Maiden sang, /As if her song could have no ending; /I saw her singing at her work, And o’er her sickle bending; /I listened, motionless and still; /And, as I mounted up the hill, /The music in my heart I bore, / Long after it was heard no more.” (p. 220)

Wordsworth’s description of the woman singing in Gaelic is keenly drawn. It is a portrait in words.

Wordsworth believed that “spots of time” came, not from self-absorption, but self-reflection. Keats referred to Wordsworth as “the egotist sublime,” but the description of the singing maiden is not the poetry of a narcissist, but a portraitist. Even when writing about his feelings, the expression concerns the universal—not the particular. In “Lines
Written Above Tintern Abbey” (1798), he describes “that blessed mood” where the self becomes secondary:

That blessed mood, in which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lighten'd: . . .

While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things. (p.156).

In all three poems the spot of time is preserved in the imagination as they nourish and repair the author’s psyche.

This ability to compose using these autobiographical moments became central to Wordsworth’s poetry. The fact that these moments stayed with Wordsworth over so many years meant that their recollection and repetition was integral to their becoming works of art.

Joyce

The same kind of recollection can be said of James Joyce's use of epiphanies. The Irish author Colm Toibin (2012) describes how Joyce carefully constructed each epiphany in his collection of short stories, The Dubliners:

By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself.

The genius of the stories is to move the thinness of the present moment from the merely personal into a number of other realms, and to do this slowly, subtly and
suggestively, using epiphanies, so that these other realms are part of the dynamic of the story rather than something imposed on it. This means that things can be both felt with sharpness and barely noticed all at the same time. (Toibin, 2012, par. 25)

Joyce used his native Dublin as the stage for these epiphanies, many of which came from his own personal experience. Joyce declared his intentions in a letter to his editor:

My intention was to write a chapter of the moral history of my country and I chose Dublin for the scene because that city seemed to be the center of paralysis. I have tried to present it to the indifferent public under four of its aspects: childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. The stories are arranged in this order. (par. 9)

There is much conjecture as to whether Joyce was writing about his life exactly in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, but there are certainly moments where the events in the novels are inspired from events in Joyce's life. *A Portrait of the Artist* was first titled as *Stephen Hero* and Joyce inserted many more autobiographical events in that first draft. The key epiphany in that novel is when the young Stephen decides not to join the priesthood. While walking on the strand near Dublin, he sees a lovely young woman by the shore:

A girl stood before him in midstream, alone and still, gazing out to sea.

She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon the flesh. Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips, where the white fringes of her drawers were like feathering of soft white down. Her slate-blue skirts were kilted boldly about her waist and dovetailed behind her. Her bosom was
as a bird's, soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish: and girlish, and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face. (Joyce, 1916, p. 171)

After a vision like this, it’s easy to see why Stephen would decide against becoming a priest. Through the use of these personal visions, Joyce constructed many of the key scenes for his short stories and novels. Toibin (2012) reminds us that through the telling of both the small gesture and the grand moment, Joyce’s epiphanies are revealed.

**Hemingway**

Hemingway’s memoir of his early years in Paris, *A Moveable Feast* (1964) was written just before his tragic suicide. While tormented by the fear that he was being followed by the FBI, Hemingway reached back in his memory to a happier time in Paris with his first wife Hadley (Note: We now know that Hemingway was in fact being followed by the FBI due to his early support of Castro). It is a series of vignettes of a happier time in the author's life.

As a young man I was able to spend a few months in Paris and walk the streets that Hemingway walked in his youth. There, I could imagine his encounters with Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and James Joyce. Through Hemingway’s memoir, I was able to create my own memories of the great city. There are times when a particular book can become a gift for one’s life and *A Moveable Feast* has been a constant gift to me.

There has been much discussion over the years about the ‘truth’ of Hemingway’s account and how close one person can get to the truth. Hemingway comments on trying to write truthfully in *A Moveable Feast*:
But sometimes when I was starting a new story and I could not get it going, I would sit in front of the fire and squeeze the peel of the little orange into the edge of the flame and watch the sputter of blue that they made. I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think,” Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence you know.” So finally I would write one true sentence, and then go from there. It was easy because there was always one true sentence that you knew or had seen or had heard someone say. If I started to write elaborately, or like someone introducing or presenting something, I found that I could cut out that scrollwork or ornament and throw it away and start with the first true declarative sentence I had written. Up in that room I decided that I would write one story about each thing that I knew about. I was trying to do this all the time and it was a good and severe discipline. (Hemingway, 1964, p. 22)

It’s interesting that Hemingway uses the word “discipline” to describe writing truthfully. Accuracy is difficult to achieve, but I think one has to start somewhere and I agree with Hemingway that it’s important to trust one’s instincts and finally put pen to paper. In effect, to begin writing autobiographically, one has to tell one’s self that there is a unique truth to tell. All that is needed is that one true opening sentence.

**Beauvoir**

When there were no more Hemingway stories about Paris to read, I switched to Simone de Beauvoir. It was wonderful to read of Paris from the viewpoint of a Parisian, but Beauvoir impressed me in other ways. She believed in “appealing to the freedom in others” (Moi, 2004, p. 142) in her writing. To demonstrate this “appeal,” Beauvoir wrote
many novels that came directly from her life experience. *She Came to Stay* (1943) is mostly taken from an affair Jean-Paul Sartre had with a younger woman, and *The Mandarins* (1954) is about Sartre and Beauvoir’s lives amidst the political turmoil immediately after WWII. In her extensive three volume autobiography: *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, (1958) *The Prime of Life*, (1960) *Force of Circumstance*, (1963) and her memoir on her mother’s death, *A Very Easy Death* (1964), Beauvoir continued to explore her own personal experiences. Beauvoir contended that an artist’s life and work were inextricably bound together.

If any individual—Samuel Pepys or Jean-Jacques Rousseau - mediocre or exceptional—reveals himself with sincerity, almost everyone is called into question. It is impossible to shed light on one’s own life without at some point illuminating the life of others. (Beauvoir, 1960, p. 10)

In an attempt to honestly reflect those tumultuous times, Beauvoir boldly stated, “I am an intellectual, I take words and truth to be of value” (Moi, 2004, p. 142).

**Orwell**

Reading *1984* (Orwell, 1949) can be an arduous experience, as Big Brother is, simultaneously, horrible and recognizable. However, the horror tends to obscure the biting satire hidden in the novel. Renaming England ‘Airstrip One,’ or calling a place of lies the ‘Ministry of Truth,’ or the ‘memory hole’ that destroys all records, are only a few examples of Orwell’s dark humour. In an earlier essay, ‘Such, Such Were the Joys,’ Orwell (1968) recollects his days in St. Cyprians Grammar School. It shows that the horror and humour of *1984* had their gestation in the education system. The most comic moment in the essay is when the headmaster and his wife (Orwell names them Flip and
Sambo) attempt to root out a masturbation ring that they believe is running rampant throughout the school. Without knowing what his crime is, young Orwell is accused of being part of the group:

At any rate, one day the storm suddenly burst over our heads. There were summonses, interrogations, confessions, floggings, and repentances, solemn lectures of which one understood nothing except that some irredeemable sin known as ‘swinishness’ or ‘beastliness’ had been committed. One of the ringleaders, a boy named Horne, was flogged, according to eyewitnesses, for a quarter of an hour continuously before being expelled. His yells rang through the house. But we were all implicated, more or less, or felt ourselves to be implicated. Guilt seemed to hang in the air like a pall or smoke.

A solemn, black-haired imbecile of an assistant master, who was later to be a Member of Parliament, took the older boys to a secluded room and delivered a talk on the Temple of the Body. He turned his cavernous black eyes on me and added quite sadly: ‘And you, whom I'd always believed to be quite a decent person after your fashion—you, I hear, are one of the very worst.’ A feeling of doom descended upon me. So I was guilty too. I too had done the dreadful thing, whatever it was, that wrecked you for life, body and soul, and ended in suicide or the lunatic asylum. Till then I had hoped that I was innocent, and the conviction of sin which now took possession of me was perhaps all the stronger because I did not know what I had done. I was not among those who were interrogated and flogged, and it was not until the row was well over that I even learned about the trivial accident that had connected my name with it. Even then I understood nothing. It was not till about
two years later that I fully grasped what that lecture on the Temple of the Body had referred to. (p. 4)

One can imagine young Orwell being accused of this vague ‘beastliness’ and accepting his guilt without really knowing what he had done. Through this, we are taken to the nightmare of 1984 where the citizens are forever guilty of crimes they may one day commit. But in contrast to 1984, ‘Such, Such were the Joys’ is told in a comic style. Orwell’s intent was to show the cruelty of the school in all its absurdity.

“Such, Such were the Joys” was written during WWII, but Orwell considered it too defamatory, and did not publish it in his lifetime.

Cyril Connelly, who went to the same school, suggested that Orwell might have exaggerated here and there, but that the basic facts were true. In any event, Orwell was determined to tell his story as he saw it. And tell it he did; at over 40 pages, ‘Such, Such were the Joys’ is one of his longest essays. He clearly relished exposing the violence, class hypocrisies and inanity of the Edwardian educational system.

At My Shoulder

When I sit down to write, I often wonder what Orwell would say and how he would say it. In essay after essay he exposes the hypocritical underbelly of totalitarian thought, whether it’s in England, the USSR, or in the dictatorships of the mind. His bravery, compassion and dogged determination, even in the face of his impending death, continue to be a wonder to me. All five of the above mentioned writers have been standing, (I’m sure reluctantly) at my shoulders as I write. It’s a kind of conjuring trick I employ as I rely on their courage for my inspiration. It’s interesting that all five have, in
some way, been concerned with truth in their stories. But truth, as we know, is a tricky subject.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault addresses truth and giving an account of one’s self in his inimitable style:

My problem is the relationship of self to self and that of saying the truth. My problem never ceased to be always the truth, speaking the truth, that is, the speaking of truth—and the relationship between speaking truth and the forms of reflexivity of the self on self. (Foucault, as cited in Butler, 2005, p. 121)

This seems straightforward until we get to the phrase, “the forms of reflexivity of the self on self.” In effect, how does the author question him/herself while attempting to tell the truth? What filters are placed between the author and his/her audience or between the author and him or herself? One must ask: why do we need to tell the truth? What do we leave out of our stories and why? What author will not feel doubt if constantly asked if s/he is telling the truth? Hemingway’s “one true sentence” might seem over-simplistic in the face of these questions. In the end, the non-fiction author must struggle with the desire to create their version of events, despite criticism. This is true in all of the five authors I find inspirational. Joyce left Dublin choosing ‘silence, cunning and exile’ in Europe to write stories of his hometown. Wordsworth was dubbed the “egotistical sublime,” for his too personal “spots of time.” (p.302). Orwell wouldn’t even consider publishing "Such, Such were the Joys" for fear of being sued. Beauvoir was one of the last French philosophers to describe ‘truth’ as a concrete entity before being swept aside by post-modern relativism. Yet all these authors were concerned with trying to get their stories factually correct. In his letters, Joyce obsessively wrote home to get the correct
names, places and dates while writing *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses.*

While it’s impossible for any one person to tell the absolute truth in a story, it is possible to, as Foucault (1997) puts it, “give an account of oneself, “(p.121) according to one’s recollections. Carolyn Ellis’s *The Ethnographic I* (2004) uses a technique she calls “evocative autoethnography” and addresses the notion of truth in the following way:

Rather than believing in the presence of an external, unconstructed truth, researchers on this end of the continuum embrace narrative truth, which means that the experiences they depict become believable, lifelike, and possible. Through narrative we learn to understand the meanings and significance of the past as incomplete, tentative and revisable according to our contingencies of present life circumstances. (p. 30)

Gutkind (2012) agrees that narrative truth can be created if one makes the distinction between truth and facts:

Factual accuracy is much easier to achieve than total truthfulness because facts can be nailed down, while truth is elusive and undeniably personal. When writing creative nonfiction, you must attempt to achieve a chain of truths: be true to your story, true to your characters and true to yourself. (p. 30)

After attempting to tell stories using factual accuracy, some authors go further by trying to understand the motivations behind telling the stories.

Miller (2011) discussed how, growing up as a black child brought up by a white family, he found himself in some strange situations. While his autoethnography is about race, he sees it also as a challenge to “trouble and provoke my own sensibilities:”
This study does not attempt to engage in formalized theory building or comment on specific literature regarding race. Rather it is meant to trouble and provoke my own sensibilities with regard to race and demonstrate—in highly concrete ways—how issues of race are often played out in complicated ways. (p. 347)

While describing the overt racism he experienced as a child and the more subtle forms of racism he encountered at university, Miller (2011) tells stories about his tormentors. By doing this, he focuses on the social justice aspects of autoethnography, going beyond merely recounting his life story. Miller tells of how he experienced racism and also questions why he feels driven to tell the story in the first place. Following Foucault’s (1997) notion of reflexivity, Miller’s autoethnographic story is reflective about not only the events, but also the motivation behind telling them. Miller “provokes” himself to get closer to the truth of the story.

My own personal example of this can be seen in a story included in this dissertation called, “The Priest and I.” This is the tale of a cult-like group in the early 1970s where sexual abuse by a priest takes place. The inspiration to write this came after watching the CBC presentation, The Boys of St. Vincent (1992). This production dramatized the tragic sexual abuse that took place at Mount Cashel Orphanage in Newfoundland. Immediately after watching the program, I recalled my own experiences and wrote the first pages of my story. In effect, my epiphany changed from memory to written representation. The other inspiration to write the story was my sense of outrage. What struck me personally was that the Christian Brothers who worked at Mount Cashel were sent to the school I attended, Vancouver College, after they got in trouble in Newfoundland. (It’s a sad reality that when sexual abusers were caught while working for
the Catholic church, residential schools, the Boy Scouts, and the public school system, they were often moved to another setting only to offend again). What bothered me was that these Catholic institutions pleaded innocence right up to the point where the brothers were found guilty.

Even more galling was that Vancouver College asked the school alumni to contribute money to pay for the multi-million dollar settlement awarded to the students of Mount Cashel. Some truth was not being told in this instance, and I was provoked to write my story from that unfortunate time to try to balance the account at least in my own mind. As Orwell puts it in 1984, “There was truth and there was untruth, and if you clung to the truth even against the whole world, you were not mad” (1949, p. 17).

This was my original intention in writing the story entitled ”The Priest and I.” I became more interested in the debate about author intention during my doctoral studies. I’ve always enjoyed reading literature and then reading what the author intended while creating the work. It has been argued that the intention behind the creation a work of art should not be included in literary analysis. The “Intentional Fallacy” by Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954), says just this. This negation of the author's motivation for writing was continued by Foucault in his essay “What is an Author?”(1969) and Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”(1968). Derrida famously proclaimed “Il n’y a rien hors du texte” (there is nothing outside of the text).

However, there has been a gradual return to the author's intentions in the last decade. Even Derrida proposed later in life:

But right now I have a feeling that I’m always in that preliminary stage or moment, and I would like to write differently again. Differently, that would mean
in a more fictional, and a more (so to speak, in quotation marks, many quotation marks) ‘autobiographical’ way. (Burke, 1998, p.170)

It would seem that post-modernism is looking again at the author, where its initial focus was on the reader. I think that the author has too long been sidelined by the reader. While I think the focus on the reader has been beneficial to our understanding of literature, I think it's sad that author intention has been all but ignored.

To counter this trend, I will comment on my own stories “to trouble and provoke my own sensibilities.” Naturally, the reader has the choice whether or not to accept the reasons why an author writes stories, but I don’t think that should stop the author from discussing his/her inspiration. As a result, this is a different kind of dissertation - one that is creative, but also one that discusses the roots of that creativity. To that end, I will first tell the stories and, in a later chapter, reflect on them. I will be stepping back and looking at the total picture that the stories portray. In effect, the process will be both reflexive and postmodern while keeping the author very much alive.

Precendents

There are a growing number of creative dissertations that don’t follow traditional methods of research. Willis, Montavon, Hall, Hunter, Burke and Herrera, in Critically Conscious Research, (2008) cite a number of researchers that use either narrative inquiry or autoethnography, such as Klevan (2002), Pilcher (2001), Asher, (2005) Aveling, (2001), Marker, (2000), Reed, (2003) and Aguirre (2005). The Faculty of Education at U.B.C. has overseen over 30 arts-based dissertations in literary, visual and performative fields (Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, Grauer, 2006) many of whom engage in narrative inquiry of some sort.
Rishma Dunlop’s *Boundary Bay* (1999) for example is both a novel and a dissertation at the same time. While not strictly autobiographical, much of the writing reflects the author’s life as a university instructor.

In her introduction, Dunlop characterizes her novel as a *Bildungsroman* in the tradition of Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861) and *David Copperfield* (1850) and Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Placing her novel within this tradition, Dunlop (1999) writes:

*Boundary Bay*, as a novel of education and development, follows the general form of the Bildungsroman: 1) A Bildungsroman is, most generally, the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order. The growth process, at its roots a quest story, is both an apprenticeship to life and a search for meaningful existence in society. 2) To spur the hero or heroine on to his/her journey, some form of loss or discontent must jar the protagonist at an early stage away from the home or family setting. 3) The process of maturity is long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of repeated clashes between the protagonist's needs and desires and the views and judgments enforced by social order. 4) Eventually, the spirit and values of the social order become manifest in the protagonist, who is then accommodated into society. The novel ends with an assessment by the protagonist of self and place in society. (p. 7)

Dunlop (1999) goes further by using her novel as a form of academic research:

The novel or literary narrative as a viable representation mode for research can be envisioned in light of the perception that ideas can be reflectively addressed through the arts. (p. 5)
While her dissertation is a work of fiction, Dunlop credits interviews with education students as the inspiration for her novel. Anticipating the question why she didn’t use standard ethnography to interview others about her research interests, Dunlop (1999) responds:

Actual transcripts and interviews or more standard forms of writing research often fail to adequately represent human experience in all its richness and complexity; in other words, they sometimes “miss the point” of seeing things anew in ways that are transformative. (p. 6)

She goes on to explain why she chose to take the bold step of transforming her initial research into a novel:

My decision to use the form of a novel to communicate findings from the engagement in narrative and arts-based inquiry with beginning teachers is based on the belief that this form will enlarge understandings in the field of education and other disciplines whose boundaries are crossed in the writings. (Dunlop, 1999, p. 7)

Dunlop’s challenge to “enlarge understandings in the field of education,”(p.7) using creative writing was made in 1999. Since that time the field of creative arts-based research has grown enormously (e.g., Leggo (2009), Irwin (2007), Eisner (2007), Ellis (2007), Denzin (2008), Saldana (2008).)

Similar to Dunlop, I too will use creative writing in this dissertation. In my case, I won't use the form of a novel, but a series of stories from my own educational experiences. The characters and settings of these stories are not fictional, but aside from myself, they will be given fictionalized names. My thesis is that something can be learned from a lifetime surrounded by education. That “something” is hard to encapsulate in a
few words, but it has to do with stopping the clamour of teaching and taking note of what remains in memory. By doing this, the teacher might postpone the feeling that s/he has arrived at the last train station without knowing it. Instead, by listening to the stories that reverberate in the mind and writing them down, there is a chance that the teacher will be able to better understand the ups and downs of a lifetime of teaching. Looking at my own stories, I can see how their overall trajectory follows the patterns of loss, quest, conflict and reintegration mentioned in Dunlop’s analysis of the Bildungsroman.

**Methodology**

I have always been attracted to scientific/positivist research. I enjoy looking at numbers and attempting to find patterns in them. I also think that, in the right hands, scientific methods can be an effective tool for social justice. I’ve done some work comparing exam results between unregulated private schools and public schools and there is some satisfaction in digging up factual material that can be used to eventually close down fly-by-night educational scams.

So when I first heard the term autoethnography, I sneered. It seemed weak and lazy. It wasn’t research; it was ‘me-search.’ The image of Narcissus looking at his own reflection in the pool came to mind. However, as I studied different research approaches in my PhD program, I kept bumping into this term. Like many grad students, I was trying to think of a method where I could conduct research and get my degree. My hope was to collect data, write it up, get a degree and get out—fast. However, this approach didn’t quite match my lofty notions of attaining a PhD. I also worried that I would do something of little interest to anyone, let alone myself, and then stumble into early retirement. But I couldn’t imagine doing research that was connected to what I really loved—that is,
artistic expression and writing in particular. And then I would see that word again—"autoethnography" and I began to be interested in my own reflection.

One of the key characteristics of autoethnography is autobiographical writing. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2010) see autobiography not as something one intends to write as it happens, but that one writes in hindsight. They go on to describe how personal epiphanies are often used in autobiographies:

Most often, autobiographers write about “epiphanies”—remembered moments perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person's life (Bochner & Ellis, 1992; Denzin, 1989), times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyze lived experience (Zaner, 2004), and events after which life does not seem quite the same. While epiphanies are self-claimed phenomena in which one person may consider an experience transformative while another may not, these epiphanies reveal ways a person could negotiate “intense situations” and “effects that linger—recollections, memories, images, feelings—long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished.” (par. 6)

This is suggestive of Joyce’s epiphanies and Wordsworth’s ‘spots of time.’ Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010) also believe that these autobiographical moments have staying power after the initial event is long over. But they also contend that autoethnography is more than just autobiography. By applying aspects of ethnography to autobiography, autoethnographers “retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis et al., 2010, par. 6).
The question then arises, what is the difference between being a storyteller and being an autoethnographer? Allen (2010) suggests the autoethnographer must, look at experience analytically. Otherwise [you're] telling [your] story—and that's nice—but people do that on Oprah [a U.S.-based television program] every day. Why is your story more valid than anyone else's? What makes your story more valid is that you are a researcher. You have a set of theoretical and methodological tools and a research literature to use. That's your advantage. If you can't frame it around these tools and literature and just frame it as 'my story,' then why or how should I privilege your story over anyone else's I see 25 times a day on TV? (Ellis et al., 2010, par. 9)

Ellis and Bochner (2000) also urge the autoethnographer to go beyond the therapeutic qualities of storytelling and look further into the analytic qualities of research: “If you are a storyteller rather than a story analyst then your goal becomes therapeutic rather than analytic” (2000, p.745). Ten years later, they add to this by saying, “In addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences” (Ellis et al., 2010, par. 3).

How then should one engage in this analysis in a way that is both creative and analytical? Ellis (2008) makes the distinction between analytic and evocative autoethnography (p. 215). The former is meant to focus on stories from a social science standpoint. Evocative autoethnographies, on the other hand, are more artful, focusing on how the stories are told, using plot, characters, and conflict as part of the analysis. Ellis's *The Ethnographic I* (2004) is written as a novel using composite characters and written in an artful way with a narrative arc manipulated by the author. According to Ellis, the
common element with both the analytic and the evocative forms of autoethnography is that the author comments on how and why the art was made. In more traditional forms of research there are guidelines on how data should be analyzed. These are less clear in autoethnography, but Ellis feels that it should not only be art, but art with analysis.

Citing the recent growth of autoethnographic research, Hughes, Pennington and Makris (2012) employ the AERA standards for empirical research to assess a number of recent autoethnographies. Sinner et al. (2006) propose a more radical approach to the assessment of arts-based research:

The academy possesses an opportunity to guide practices of arts–based educational research in ways that address critical concerns of rigor, validity, contribution to the field, and dissemination to a broad audience, and in so doing, make possible for even greater openings for all scholars in the future. (p. 1226)

Arts-based research is an emergent form that respects the process of creating art as well as the product of research data, “Recognizing the necessity of a methodology being practice, process and product is a key principle of arts-based educational research” (pp. 1225-1226).

Irwin promotes a combination of artist, teacher and researcher in a method called A/r/tography. Irwin and Springgay (2007) contrast scientific research with arts-based research that sees the practitioner as being on a quest:

Whereas the disciplinary-based science traditions perceive research and theory as a means of explaining phenomenon or revealing meaning, practitioner-based research perceives research as a disposition for knowledge creation and understanding through acts of theorizing through complication. In the earlier instance, theory and
research serves to find answers to questions. In practitioner-based research, theorizing through inquiry seeks understanding by way of evolution of questions within the living-inquiry process of the practitioner. In other words, practitioners are interested in an on-going quest for understanding, a questing if you will. (p. 109).

Part of this “quest” involves teachers taking on the roles of artists and researchers in their interactions with their students. Fels and Belliveau (2008) see this interaction of teacher/artist/researcher in the following way:

[w]hen we as educators understand that learning emerges through the interplay of students, teacher, environment, inquiry, and the medium of inquiry, our responsibility to bring this dynamic engagement into our classrooms becomes apparent. (p. 28)

Irwin and Springgay (2007) suggest that assessment of these artistic endeavours use different methods of evaluation:

In other words, measurement is not qualifying something against something else - the setting of criteria or an established norm. Rather the conditions of measurement (assessment) are contingent upon and exist within the structure itself- an absolute measure. (p. 120)

Richardson (2000) goes even further by suggesting innovative ways to assess autoethnography. She suggests five evaluative categories:

1. Substantive contribution. Does the piece contribute to our understanding of social life?
2. Aesthetic merit. Does the piece succeed aesthetically? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfyingly complex, and not boring?

3. Reflexivity. How did the author come to write this text? How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of his text?

4. Impactfullness. Does this affect me emotionally and/or intellectually? Does it generate new questions and move me to action?

5. Express a reality. Does this text embody a fleshed out sense of lived experience? Autoethnographic manuscripts might include dramatic recall, unusual phrasing, and strong metaphors, to invite the reader to ‘relive’ events with the author. (pp.15-16)

Richardson (2000) suggests that these are questions both the writer and the reader of this new type of research must ask. For instance, is the material engaging and does it give a sense of “lived experience?” Richardson’s methods for assessing arts-based research takes research evaluation to new territory, but it is one that seems to resonate with other researchers. In their analysis of autoethnographies, Ellis (2008), Goldstein, (2012), and Holt (2003) all make use of Richardson’s guidelines. The notion that research should be aesthetically pleasing and “not boring” challenges traditional pretensions of a scientific, objective stance by bringing personal qualities and artistic expression to the work.

The purported objective stance of traditional research has received criticism in recent years. Sword (2012) studied over 1,000 articles from a number of different disciplines (medicine, biology, law, philosophy, history, literary studies, education, anthropology, psychology) to determine what makes for engaging research writing. She found that “first person anecdotes,” “catchy opening paragraphs,” “humour,” “concrete nouns” and “energetic verbs” all brought “engagement, pleasure and elegance” to the
writing no matter what discipline. In effect, these techniques are “not boring” as Richardson puts it. In the employment of personal pronouns alone, Sword finds a distinctly unscientific use of the first person in the sciences:

Another surprising finding was the predominance of first person pronouns in the sciences. The high percentages in medicine, evolutionary biology and computer science (92, 100 and 82 per cent, respectively) confound the commonly held assumption that scientists shun the pronouns I and we in their research writing. By contrast, only 54 per cent of higher education researchers in my data sample and only 40 per cent of historians use first person pronouns. (Sword, 2012, p. 18)

Using the first person does not guarantee elegant writing; however, it can assist the reader to connect with the research, thereby enhancing the impact.

Even with a wide variety of assessment tools, I often have the nagging sense that autoethnography is not reliable because its focus is only on the self. However, Ellis et al. (2010) suggest that authoethnography can go beyond the self to promote “research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us” (par. 3). In effect, through telling one’s own story, the writer can reach others with similar, but unspoken, conflicts. As the African - American author Barbara Christian puts it," What I write and how I write is done in order to save my life. And I mean that literally. For me literature is a way of knowing that I am not hallucinating, that whatever I feel/know is” (1987). Clandinin (2007) complements this by saying, ”It is in the collaboratively transformed narratives within which people live that narrative inquiry seeks to lay the foundations of social change” (p. 56). She sees narrative inquiry as
liberating because it emerges from the writer’s own experience as opposed to the ‘top-down’ Marxist or post-structuralist approaches to social justice (pp. 50-56).

**Beyond the Positive**

Autoethnographies then can be both liberating and stylish approaches to research. However, authoethnographies can go even further in “expressing a reality” by shedding light on the entire teaching experience. There is a tendency in some educational articles to present a problem and then show how that problem is solved using a particular method. If this is what really happened in education, teaching would be a much happier place than it is.

An example of this problem/solution approach can be found in de Souza Vasconcelos "I Can See You: An Autoethnography of My Teacher-Student Self" (2011). Through the use of vignettes, Vasconcelos seeks to answer the questions, “What has made me into the teacher I am” and, “what makes me the teacher I am.” Citing Freire as an influence, Vasconcelos uses her own autoethnographic stories to demonstrate how certain problems in education get solved. She provides a vignette of one student, Catherine, who has slept late and missed Vasconcelos’ Portuguese test. Luckily, this sad tale has a happy ending:

“I’ll tell you what, Catherine: if you feel you’re ready for this test and you’re available now, you’re welcome to take it with the other PORT 1001 class I’m teaching again in 30 minutes. How does that sound?”

“Oh, that would be great, thank you!” Twenty minutes later we’re walking together to class. Catherine scores an A+. (p. 427)
This is only one example of an educational problem quickly becoming a solution, and I don't doubt that this is the way events occurred. One can often find these types of stories in educational journals. But do things always work this well in education?

Even a theorist as venerated as Paolo Freire sometimes finds answers to educational problems too easily. Freire’s language is grounded in liberation politics as he attacks the ‘banking’ model of education “in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (Freire, 1968, p. 60). He counters this elitist approach by adapting the instruction to the needs of those being instructed, in his case, Brazilian peasants. In the latter half of his *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1987), Freire gives examples of how he uses ‘authentic’ instruction in the classroom:

We all know something. We are all ignorant of something. For this reason, we are always learning. Let’s read, think, and discuss.

Working with perseverance, we produce more. Producing more, on the land that is ours, we create riches for the happiness of the people.

With the MLSTP (Liberation Movement of São Tomé and Príncipe) we are building a society in which everyone participates for the well being of all. We need to be watchful against those who are trying to bring back the system of exploitation of the majority by a dominant minority. Now try to write about what you read and discussed. (Freire, 1987, p. 47)

While I admire the political stance behind this kind of teaching, I worry that, as pedagogy, it may be just another form of ‘banking.’ Did this instruction truly come from the students as Freire wants us to believe, or is it Freire’s own political agenda that the
students are espousing? Is Freire only asking his students to parrot back his views, thereby participating in a kind of groupthink?

Miller (2005) is also concerned with Freire’s agenda. On the surface it seems to be student-centred, but strangely it always generates the answer Freire is looking for. Miller comments on a quote Freire attributes to an unidentified Chilean peasant: “Now that we are respected as men, we’re going to show everyone that we were never lazy or drunkards. We were exploited!” (p. 123). Miller (2005) responds to this by saying,

Freire offers up these examples of spontaneous assent as illustrations of the positive effect of his practise and we just have to take his word for it that the workers in these learning situations were saying, “what they really felt”—on the assumption, perhaps, that the illiterate and downtrodden can only speak without guile or nuance or that Freire, in some way, knows how to divine when such authentic speech has occurred. (p. 123)

Miller then looks at a darker side of Freire’s politics. The professionals (i.e., teachers) who do not share in this type of liberation politics may have to pay for their own resistance:

Borrowing a phrase from Louis Althusser, Freire then goes on to say that, although these professionals are “men who have been ‘determined from above’ by a culture of domination which has constituted them as dual beings” and despite the fact that they are “in truth more misguided than anything else, they not only could be, but ought to be, reclaimed by the revolution.” . . . One might be forced to conclude that these misguided souls might be better off dead. (Miller 2005, p. 124)
Miller began his teaching career as a Freire enthusiast, but after attempting liberation techniques in his own practise, he realized that the method did not always transfer to the North American classroom. He also worries about a pedagogy that needs to ‘reclaim’ those that don’t agree with it. Further, Miller (2005) questions instructors and students who become enthralled with this kind of rhetoric:

    Do we imagine ourselves standing outside the very system that employs us to instruct entering students in the language arts? Why, as a profession, would we be drawn to an approach that depicts professionals in such a negative light? Is the vision of teacher as liberator just a story teachers like to tell themselves about themselves - a way to make it from semester to semester that preserves whatever is left of teacher’s self esteem? (p. 125)

Teachers embracing this kind of liberation pedagogy seem to be echoing what Bob Dylan warned against in his song, ‘My Back Pages’:

    In a soldier’s stance, I aimed my hand
    At the mongrel dogs who teach
    Fearing not that I’d become my enemy
    In the instant that I preach. (Dylan, 1964)

All teachers manipulate to some extent. The banking model is clearly more overt, but even Freire’s liberation pedagogy has an agenda, and he expects his students to perform to it. While not banking per se, I would suggest that Freire is using a ‘chess master’ approach. The students seem to have a variety of moves, but they are manipulated by a chess master with a very clear agenda.
Tompkins (1990) also questions the applicability of Freire’s concepts. After borrowing from Freire’s title, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), Tompkins disagrees with some of Freire’s views, saying most North American instructors have turned away from the banking model:

I don't think that this is the model we have to contend with in the United States today, at least not in higher education, at least not for the most part. We have class discussion, we have oral reports, we have student participation of various kinds—students often choose their own paper topics, suggest additional readings, propose issues for discussion. As far as most of us are concerned, the banking model is obsolete. (Tompkins, 1990, pp. 653-654)

Freire himself states that his approach doesn’t always transfer to other settings. He discusses for example how the government of Guinea Bissau had difficulty using his ideas because they were imposed from outside and not generated from the population themselves.

However, even Tompkins’ ground-breaking personal essay “Pedagogy of the Distressed” (1990) employs the “problem/solution” structure. Despite her unswerving honesty, Tompkins also seems to find ways to solve the problems she introduces at the start of the essay. Elizabeth Ellsworth in her, "Why doesn't this feel Empowering?" (1989) questions critical pedagogies that create solutions too easily, "What would it mean to recognize not only that a multiplicity of knowledges are present in the classroom as a result of the way difference has been used to structure social relations inside and outside the classroom, but that these knowledges are contradictory, partial and irreducible?"
Perhaps there is another way of looking at educational problems that is less forced and not so easily solved.

**Weird, Unfixable Problems**

I think there is another side of teaching that is different from the guise of “teacher-as-liberator,” or the teacher as “magic-problem-solver.” That other guise is teacher as “a human-confronted-with-weird-unfixable-problems.” This may not be true for all teachers, but it is true for many. To put this experience into print is to show that some problems in education are not easily fixed. To tell these types of stories honestly, one must truly “tell it like it is,” without a pretty solution at the end.

My hope is that by looking at the more complex aspects of a teacher’s experience, others will be encouraged to analyze and tell their own stories. While positive experiences have occurred in my teaching career, they are not the ones that haunt me. For me, the stories that won’t go away are imponderable, unfixable. Again, as Camus (1955) states, “It is the confrontation of the irrational,” that teachers encounter every day and their “wild longing for clarity” that makes some experiences last longer than others. For teachers to tell these problematic stories is, to me, truly liberating, because so much of educational research ignores their existence. How will this assist the students in our classrooms? I think that teachers are always confronted with expectations of being better, rather than being who they are. The teacher must attempt to be honest with him or herself by paying attention to the stories that persist in memory. To understand these, warts and all, is perhaps a way of truly understanding one’s teaching. Eliot Eisner, a pioneer of arts-based research cautions against only “telling it like it is.” He feels that, in the end, arts-based research be more than poetic or honest, it must contribute to education:
If arts-based research culminates in little more than a delightful poetic passage or a vivid narrative that does little educational work, it is not serving its function. In other words, I am trying to remind us here that in the end, research is an instrument, whether arts-based or not, that is supposed to contribute to the quality of education students receive and that arts-based research must ultimately be appraised on the extent to which that aim is realized. (2007, p. 23)

How then can one teacher’s stories “contribute to the quality of education students receive”? Johnny Saldana (2008), through his autoethnographic plays, is a great practitioner of contributing to education while at the same time “telling it like it is.” Saldana’s auto-ethnodrama entitled “Second Chair” (2009) does just this. It is an example of performative autobiographical writing. His introduction describes the play in the following way:

Second Chair is an auto-ethnodramatic one-man play; it explores the reminiscences by an older adult of his high school band years and his quest to become first chair clarinettist. The play is a metaphor for the feelings of lesser status experienced by the marginalized individual in a competitive mainstream society. The full play script is included, accompanied with the author’s reflections on the development and performance of the piece, and its implications for narrative inquiry. (Saldana, 2008, p.177)

From the following excerpt, Saldana shows us the importance giving risky information when writing a play about one’s self:

But to a young gay man, and second chair, it was not just about competition; it was also about . . . (brief pause; looks at first chair) jealousy. (To audience)
There are three things gay men are very good at: redecorating a room, preparing brunch, (staring at first chair briefly) and being petty and vindictive bitches.

Now, Tammi Jo and I were actually quite good friends. We had been sitting next to each other as first and second chair for almost a year already, and we would often joke and laugh, quietly of course, while Mr. Garcia worked with or (snickers) yelled at the brass and percussion sections.

And since I was also involved with high school theatre at the time and quite the closeted drama queen, Tammi Jo and I made a secret pact: as soon as I would win the Academy Award for best actor, she would win the Nobel Prize for medicine. She was the genius of our school. You know her kind: straight A-pluses on each report card, first on the honour roll, reading Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* without being required to, and eventually becoming valedictorian of our graduating class. She was smart. And skinny - thin as a rail! Me? (rises) My top weight in high school was 310 pounds.” (Saldana, 2008, p.181)

Here we learn that Saldana is gay, overweight, jealous, funny, and salacious. Saldana refers to this kind of writing as the “juicy stuff” (1998). That is, it risks by providing personal information that is interesting to the reader while creating dramatic tension.

Saldana’s call for ‘juicy stuff” might at first seem glib, but it actually is key to autoethnography. It is important to risk, to tell stories that engage the reader. This has always been the case with any successful narrative: first, that it has a beginning, middle and an end, (in whatever order they appear) but more importantly, that it pulls the reader in, rather than pushing him or her away.
The stand-up comedian takes a similar approach. His or her jokes rely on the tight structure of a narrative. It would be rare, for example, for the comedian to begin a joke with the punch line. So too is it true of the storyteller; the tale must unfold artfully. Many different forms of autobiographical writing have recently emerged with the aim of telling non-fiction artfully.

**Creative Non-fiction, Life-Writing, Memoir, Metissage, and Autoethnography**

Gutkind (2012) defined creative non-fiction as, “an essay, a journal article, a research paper, a memoir, or a poem, it can be personal or not, or it can be all these” (p. 9). He also adds that creative non-fiction is “the most popular genre in the literary and publishing communities” (p. 9). There are a number of other autobiographical terms that are associated with creative non-fiction. “Life writing” is often used interchangeably with autobiography (Halsam & Neale 2009, Fuchs & Howes, 2007, Okawa, 2007) and can include journals, memoirs and diaries. Richard Bradford’s *Life Writing* (2010) uses all three to showcase a variety of writers using these different genres.

There seems to be no strict rules to life writing as a genre. This new form is expanding in a variety of ways. An example of a collaborative style of life writing can be found in Carl Leggo, Cynthia Chambers, and Erika Hasebe-Ludt's *Life writing and Literary Metissage as an Ethos for our Times* (2010). The authors engage in a braid-like form of writing. After presenting a series of autobiographical poems and stories, the authors have the stories interact with each other by forming a writing collective. Leggo, in “The Ecology of Personal and Professional Experience,” (2007) goes further with the braid metaphor:
We need a different culture, a culture that supports autobiographical writing that is marked by an understanding that writing about personal experiences is not merely egoism, solipsism, unseemly confession, boring prattle, and salacious revelation. We need to write personally because we live personally, and our personal living is always braided with our other ways of living—professional, academic, administrative, social and political (p. 91).

He points out that we take our lives with us even into the classroom:

As a teacher, I do not leave my home and family experiences behind me when I drive to campus or when I enter the classroom. And I do not leave my past either. I am the person I am because of the experiences and people and places that comprise my life and being. (p. 91)

Analyzing one’s own life seems to be catching on, as the memoir business is booming. From Neil Young’s *Waging Heavy Peace* (2012) to Keith Richard's *Life* (2010) to Paul Auster’s *Winter Journal* (2012) to Salman Rushdie's *Joseph Anton* (2012), memoirs run the gamut from rock and roll recall to high art. Many artists of a certain age seem bent on telling their own stories. Perhaps this is particular to baby boomers who once heard the clarion call of experimentation and, after settling down and raising children, now have the time to explain what really happened.

George Bowering's *Pinboy* (2012) is an example of this type of memoir. Bowering gleefully recalls his youth in the South Okanagan in the mid-50s. Calling his work a memoir, Bowering goes to great lengths to assure the reader that this is how he remembers the events. He also tells us that he promised he would never share his sexual escapades with another human. Clearly the stories were too good to keep to himself.
Return to Autoethnography

The stories in this dissertation could be deemed memoir, but I wanted to go one step further. The main distinction between memoir and autoethnography is that the latter calls for an analysis of the text. I’ve always been interested in writing stories, and I’m also interested in challenging the notion of the “intentional fallacy.” I believe the author does have intention when writing the story and that intention should be taken into account. I also think that an artist should be able to comment on the work after its finished. Authoethnography, according to Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2010), allows for both the writing of the story and reflecting on what was written.

An excellent example of this kind of intentional analysis can be found in John Steinbeck’s Journal of a Novel (1969). In his journal, Steinbeck details, day-by-day, how and why he wrote his novel, East of Eden. Steinbeck would begin each day by writing a letter to his editor explaining what he was feeling and why he was going to write a particular chapter. The result is a fascinating look into the struggle and joy of creating art. This is a kind of autoethnography in that it is not just storytelling as therapeutic release, but an analysis of the stories for artistic purposes. In my own case, I will present the stories and a few related poems and then reflect later on what direction they seem to be pointing; what patterns they are creating.

As mentioned earlier, my own stories are not overtly pedagogical. They are not about how or why I teach. They are about some of the lasting events that occurred to a teacher while engaged in education.

Through the use of autobiographical prose, I hope, as Wordsworth puts it, “to see into the life of things,” or at least to see into a life of things. I know that writing
autobiographically is performative, and I am also aware that I am manipulating the material. I think it is safe to say that there is a certain degree of artifice in any artistic endeavour. The tricks of the trade an artist learns over the course of an apprenticeship engenders a certain kind of artistic expression—whether impressionistic, naturalistic or post-modern. I attempt to follow Hemingway’s naturalism in my writing, but this too has its share of artifice. As Oscar Wilde cleverly put it, “Being natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know” (Wilde, 1986, p. 2).

While I attempt to understand my motives, I think one can never get to the bottom of that rabbit hole. To alter Foucault’s (1997) notion of reflexivity slightly, I hope to be reflective about the material I write—to look into Narcissus’ pool, but also to step away from it and reflect on what I saw.

Conclusion

I am always in awe of my Grade 8 students when they create sustained fictional stories. They are capable of creating imaginary worlds using science fiction and fantasy. At this stage in my life, I think that ship has sailed, as I’ve never really taken to fiction. My main source of narrative raw material has been the memories of the ironic, strange, absurd, beautiful world of teaching and being taught. As a result, I don’t think of these stories as fictional. I consider them creative non-fiction, in the same way David Sedaris or Lee Gutkind do, because their gestation is based on fact. While I can’t be sure that every word is true, I can attest to their factual origins.

I also don’t know what I will find once all the stories are told. It’s like putting together pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and not knowing the overall image until the last pieces are put in place. As I started to plan the stories and essays that I wanted to tell, I saw
some patterns emerging, but they were in dark outlines, not clear images. This reminds me of the child that promises that s/he will never do the things his/her parents did upon becoming parents, and then proceeds to do them. For example, I attended a physically brutal school and promised myself to not repeat that kind of brutality as a teacher. Is it possible that my exposure to that kind of brutality might emerge in my teaching as other forms of control? These are the kinds of questions that may emerge after all the stories are completed. This, then, is a process of discovery at the same time as it is a dissertation.
CHAPTER TWO: THE STORIES

Across the Great Divide

I get off the bus at the loop beside the Student Union building. It’s 7:00 a.m. on a dark, wet October morning. I walk in front of the SUB building on the way to the library to pick up a book for my class. I’m giggling. To be in university again, to be getting a book at the library, to be walking in front of the building that was built two years before I came to university in 1972 makes me giddy. Thomas Wolfe said you can’t go home again, but maybe you can go to university again.

I also feel afraid. I know I can’t get back the passion, learning, love, and sheer fun, of those early years, but at least I feel a part of the enterprise again. There is a sense that doors are being opened just a crack. I know I will be tested, but I come to this enterprise this time as an older man—not an 18-year old.

First, I have to meet my advisor.

Here are some of the weird things I said to him, “I’d like to stop teaching and perhaps pick up the odd sessional course to augment my pension.”

He basically said: “Don’t do that; your teacher’s pension is better than the professors.” This was just before the financial crisis kicked in and theirs was tied to the market.

Then I said to him, “I’d like to stop teaching high school and just be a scholar.”

I had heard of these wonderful fellowships, or SSHRC (Social Science and Humanities Research Council) grants that would pay me $100,000 a year to study. My advisor looked at me somewhat sceptically, “So you’d like to be a scholar.” “Yes,” I
imagined myself deep in a library, smoking a pipe with patches on the elbows of my
jacket saying “greetings” to my fellow scholars.

He said, in effect, keep your day job. "This will take some extra work; you’ll just
have to watch a little less TV some nights.”

That sounded sensible. I'd keep teaching high school and take classes in the
evenings. So much for being a scholar. I enrolled in my first class and watched a little
less TV. After I got through my first course, my advisor said, “Getting a PhD is like
climbing a very difficult mountain. In your case, teaching at a high school full-time and
doing a PhD is like climbing that mountain with a series of overhanging ledges.” I
thought of the ledges Tom Cruise scaled in the Mission Impossible movies and started to
feel vertigo. Which was it? A little less TV or overhanging ledges?

What it turned out to be was 4:30 in the morning and bags under my eyes. That’s
what comes from reading, or trying to read, Foucault at that time of day.

It was a somewhat monastic life. I didn’t smoke a pipe, but I did read new authors
and doors were flung open, but mostly into empty elevator shafts where my mind was
boggled by the latest in educational thought. Then people started asking the question.

The Question

“Why are you doing a PhD?” (“at your age” was implied).

I wasn’t asked this question once, but many times—usually by friends, fellow
teachers and younger PhD students.

My answers were at first flip, “For my mother” (this was partially true) or,
“because I get a break in my tuition for sponsoring student teachers and my Scottish
blood wouldn’t let it go to waste” (also somewhat true). A truer reason was that I was getting bored as a teacher. I had six years to go.

I remember the moment as if it were yesterday. I was standing at the chalkboard in my classroom writing something I had written many times before. (Was it the definition of a simile, or the semi-omniscient point of view?) I felt the strange sensation of having the wind knocked out of me. This had happened to me three or four times as a boy. Someone punches you hard in the solar plexus and you fall to the ground gasping for air. You feel as if you’re going to die. But my sensation at the blackboard was slower than that. I had a flash from the movie Election (1998) starring Matthew Broderick. He too stands at the board writing, “The executive, the legislative, and the judicial,” over and over. His student, Tracy Flick, played wonderfully by Reese Witherspoon, looks at him with pity. How could he teach the same material year in and year out?

These were the things that were going through my mind as I wrote on the board. I didn’t double over in pain, but I felt weak. It was the sense that I had spent 20 years writing these words and had at least six to go. My first reaction was, "Get me out of here!" Then, I became depressed, because I couldn’t get out. A week later, after being asked persistently, I told my wife what was wrong. “You have to mix it up,” she said, “do something different.” And she was right. I had to challenge myself.

How I envied the physics teacher that knew every day of the year what he would be teaching. “We can’t have a fire drill that day,” the physics teacher would say, “I’m teaching the fulcrum on March 28th!” I didn’t really envy him though. That approach seemed, to me, to be the death of education. To know every day what I’d be doing made
no sense to me. So I had to challenge myself in a different way… hey, why not go try to teach some university courses?

The constant critique of university instructors was that they hadn’t set foot in a high school classroom in decades. They couldn’t say that about me. I had been teaching the metaphor for 20 years. How could they turn me down? (Maybe because I had taught the metaphor for 20 years). I could offer something to student teachers who felt that the university was too theory-based and not grounded in classroom practice. So the university did kindly give me some sessional work in the summer. For which I am grateful; the money was good and I was able to share my views on teaching and pass on a trick or two. Until one day, I was in front of a group of 35 BEd students holding forth about English instruction, when one student tested my credentials. “Do you know anything about critical theory?” he asked. What was my view of Foucault? I told him that Foucault was not important to the high school teacher.

He kept at it. He saw my weak spot right away. I kept saying that the names he was bringing up were never mentioned in high school. But then I wondered . . . And a huge gulf opened before me. Who were these people? Foucault, Derrida, Barthes, Bakhtin? I really had no idea. I knew that some were in a group that Harold Bloom had termed ‘The School of Resentment,’ but what they actually thought was beyond me. And there lay the great divide; a yawning gulf between what the average working teacher in the classroom knew and what was taught at university.

In effect, the one student who questioned my knowledge of Foucault was engaging in a kind of resistance. He scared me into my PhD. I couldn’t fake it anymore. In a power relationship where I was supposed to have the power, I felt challenged enough
to alter the direction of my life for the next five years. I didn’t know who these important, mostly French, philosophers were. I can’t say that I understand all of it now, but at least I can fake it better. So, because of that student, I decided to try bridge the gap between the high school teacher and the academic.

There is, of course, some veiled antagonism between these two groups. Prior to beginning my PhD, the common talk in the high school staffroom was that the higher the degree, the more ineffective the teacher. A familiar comment was that someone with a PhD is stupider than your average BEd. A teacher with a Master’s degree was tolerated as long as s/he didn’t talk about it.

Why this friction between town and gown? It’s not like being a high school teacher with a PhD is the same as becoming an administrator. The money doesn’t get better. You certainly don’t have more power in the school. In some cases you have less. The thinking is that one only gets a PhD to escape the classroom and enter into the cushy world of sabbaticals and teaching one class a week. So, to announce that I was going for a PhD at this late stage was deemed suspicious by my high school colleagues. In a way it was traitorous.

Meanwhile back at the university, it became common knowledge that I had retired, even though I hadn’t.

“Now that you’re retired, what do you plan to do?” they asked.

“But I haven’t retired,” I told them, “I’m still teaching full time at the high school and I’m taking my studies after school.”

“Why are you doing this?” they asked.

This was not going to be easy . . .
So I entered a world I didn’t understand. It took me a while to make some sense of it. I took my first classes and everyone seemed to put up with me. But by the second course, I put my foot in it.

It was one of those typical late afternoon classes at the university. I had taught high school all day and was trying to shake off the residue of my two grade nine classes. The sense of being shut-in permeated the seminar room and I wondered what the professor would do next. She told us of an exercise she had done with an earlier class. She had taken a short story, cut it up by paragraphs into many pieces and made multiple copies of each cut-up. Then she put her class into six groups and asked the groups to reorganize the paragraphs into a kind of form. The results were interesting in their variety, as many groups put together the paragraphs in different orders creating a wide variety of new stories. I was a big supporter of this kind of participatory exercise and immediately thought about how I could adapt it to my own classes.

Showing my age, I raised my hand and asked a foolish question, “Did any of the groups get it right?” I asked. There was a scary quiet.

“What do you mean by ‘right’?” the professor inquired. Even at this point, I felt the eyes of the mostly younger students swivel in my direction. “You know,” I responded, “the way the author wrote it.”

At this point, it seemed as if the air was alive with electric energy as two or three students said in a kind of unison,” There is no right way! What the author intended is of no consequence.”

Chastised, I let out a short “ Harrumph” and settled back in my chair. I felt like an old man who had been told that we use cars now, not horses.
The professor kindly sent along the famous tract “The Intentional Fallacy” (Wimsatt & Beardsely, 1954). The theory seemed to be that the author’s intention had nothing to do with the text. Text should be analysed by looking exclusively at the words on the page. Who the author was, or what the author wanted to get across, was of no consequence.

We took up the topic again the next class.

Having had time to think about my public scolding, I came up with an analogy that seemed to work for me. This is the way I saw it:

Imagine you are invited to a meal. You go to the dinner and the food is exquisite. You look at your plate filled with wonderful colors, textures and tastes and you allow yourself to slowly enjoy each bite. Would you not, at some point, turn to the chef, (the cook, your partner, wife/husband) and say, “This is the most wonderful meal. How did you do it? What are the ingredients? “ Wouldn’t you give credit to the person that put it all together? Even in the event that the food tastes bad, wouldn’t you blame the person that put it together, or would you merely blame the taste and texture on your own palate? Of course, we would correctly lay the praise or the blame at the feet of the person who created it. Even if this person wielded some power over you, say a parent, wouldn’t you still try to give him/her credit, or blame?

The other students looked at me. I looked at them. The divide opened like a chasm.

After class, I offered one of my fellow students a ride home. We chatted about the class and my faux pas. She laughed at my error, but then said she didn’t believe in that, “‘Death of the Author’ bullshit.” I felt momentarily relieved.
Then she asked why was I doing a PhD (at my age).

I went back to my advisor the next day, my tail between my legs, and explained that I hoped to research this topic for my dissertation. “That's a good idea,” he said, “but why don't you write stories about your time as a teacher? Why don't you become the author/artist?” Thinking that I wasn't getting good advice, I went to the other members of my committee. I told them of my original idea and they said, “That’s a good idea, but why don’t you try writing stories about your time as a student and a teacher.”

Okay, if you insist, I will.

(But secretly, this is what I've wanted to do for years.....)

Glory

I’m running down the street. In those days, the curbs of our street were not concrete, but gently sloping grass—perfect for a glorious catch. The football is in the air. I am four feet in front of my defender and can see the arc coming beautifully toward me. I launch my 12 year-old body into the air, make the catch and land on the soft grassy curb. Glory.

There are only four of us playing, but this doesn’t matter. I don’t need a large audience because I’m replicating on my street what I’ve seen on television. It’s a small crowd, but it brings a great thrill. It seems to me that this is only the beginning of a world filled with glory—little did I know that glory comes in many forms. Robert Frost speaks of the road not taken and the paths that strangely lead in a number of unintended directions. By throwing myself into the air that day I was, unknowingly, beginning my journey.
I was obsessed with football in Grade 8. A friend and I would pour over old Vancouver College yearbooks looking at the pictures of the football teams and dream of joining their ranks. We promised each other that we’d both leave grammar school, go to the College and try-out for the football team. But, he went to another school—a public school no less. And then my father died. My father who had gone to Vancouver College himself and, I think, liked the idea of me playing football.

This was in Grade 8, I was 13, so I tried to pretend like nothing happened when he died. I still remember one nun in the grammar school who caught me having fun with a friend at the back of the class. With just the right amount of Catholic shame she pronounced, “I wouldn't be fooling around like that if my father had just died.”

This was the new world I had been thrown into, one without a father. Did that mean I was somehow defenseless? There may be some truth to that. My mother had her own grief and five kids to look after, so maybe the teachers could go a little wilder on a kid without a father to protect him. Who knows? I felt sympathy from some people, but I also felt unprotected.

In any event, football seemed to be my only goal in those days and I yearned to go to the school that had the best football team in the city. There was a scholarship offered to any boy wanting to go to Vancouver College. I think I wrote a single page application. I knew I had only one other competitor. He had only written a sentence or two because he didn't want to go to, as he called it, “that shithole.” Did he know something I didn't?

So there I was, early fall, the leaves turning, walking to my new school in what I considered College garb. No need to wear the despised Catholic blue sweater, blue pants, white shirt. I still had to wear a tie, but I could also wear my brother’s paisley shirt.
I was practically friendless, but I couldn’t let that worry me. I was there to play ball and duly turned up for the initial practice of the junior varsity team. There were some older boys there and we grade nines were told that we were to scrimmage with the varsity boys. They turned out to be some of the toughest guys in Vancouver. We were 13-year-old boys going up against 18-year-old men.

Vancouver College is often represented as a rich kids’ school, but in reality, there were boys from all over Vancouver. My football career was cut short that year after they lined us up in front of these giants from East Van who took great delight in seeing how far down in the grass they could push our faces. After two practices I'd had enough and decided to wait until the next year when I was hopefully bigger. My dreams weren't dashed, just postponed.

I didn't do well academically that first year because I was mostly interested in getting accepted into whatever group of friends would have me. I was ready to hang out with anyone so I wouldn't have to spend the dreaded Friday night alone. I saw the popular students away in the distance and realized I never had a chance.

I knew I had to give football the old college try once more, so in Grade 10, I showed up for the first practice. The coach was a small, crew-cut man, Darren Mulgrew, who started calling us names on the first day.

“Hill, you dumb shit, where do you think you’re going?”

This struck me as odd. We were supposed to be good Catholic boys taught by good Catholic teachers. Mulgrew’s philosophy however, was to break us down and rebuild us in his own image. This method never works. It just leaves people messed-up. But he was going to break us if it took all season.
The other sad part of the story was that Mulgrew decided to put me in the position of tackle. This has to be the least fun job in football as you have to stand in the front protecting the pretty boy quarterback while you get the crap knocked out of you by the opposing team. Then I saw my chance to get out. One day, they switched offence and defensive players and I had the chance to carry the ball.

It’s probably one of the few times I really tried for something hard because I wanted it so bad. This must have got across to the coach because they moved me into fullback—a position where I got to carry the ball.

I was thrilled and tried to learn all the plays. But I was in a constant state of confusion as the coach kept calling the players “dumb shits,” “assholes,” “weaklings,” “women,” etc. I started to fumble the ball. I was given 10 laps around the field each time I fumbled the ball. We won some games, but we lost most. I guess we didn't have the killer instinct the coach required. He continued to try to break us down.

The team started to grumble and I took on the role as a kind of locker room shit-disturber. This was a job I'd perfect later in life, but I was quite good at it even then. I suppose I thought it had something to do with social justice.

“The coach is nuts,” I’d say, “We should do something.” There was growing dissent in the locker room. People listened when I suggested we rise up and revolt.

Then we lost the next game. We had a very strange practice the next day. The coach yelled at us for 10 minutes calling us every name in the book. He began by saying that every member of the team had to run 20 laps. But first he said we were to form a circle. One player would be put in the middle of the circle. The coach would then call out the jersey number of different players in quick succession and those players were to run
at the player in the middle. Then he said, “The first player that draws blood on the guy in the middle doesn't have to do his laps.” We stared at each other furtively. This was too weird. Would we rebel as we said we would? Then he called out my name.

“Hill, get in the middle.”

Not wanting to be the first one to have my blood drawn, I imagine I walked slowly to my place.

“You dumb shit Hill, speed it up! This is just like you, always slow. Well, we'll see how slow you are today. Number 32!” he brayed.

Number 32 was Leo. He was a big boy, from the east side and I'd seen him destroy people on the field. He hesitated, looked at the coach, then ran up to me quickly. But he slowed at the last second, giving me a slight tap before he trotted off.

The coach went wild.

“No, you idiot Auer. Hit him! Hit him hard!”

He called out two more numbers and both boys gave me the same slight tap.

Mulgrew went more berserk. He threw his clipboard on the ground, then his whistle. Finally the assistant coach, who seemed to have some decency in him, whispered to Mulgrew that the drill didn't seem to be working and perhaps we should just do our laps. We were sent off in shame, but beneath it all, I felt solidarity. The team had understood that the coach was wrong and that we would stand together.

When we lost our next game Mulgrew told us ominously that we'd have to practice early Saturday morning. We grumbled more than ever the next morning and swore we'd do something about it. I agreed with the rest of the team that if the coach went
nuts we would take action. We got to the field and the coach paced back and forth, already worked up.

“Get in line you little bastards. You’re going to pay for losing that game,” he said.

“No, Auer, you dumb shit, not that line, get in this one.”

Leo replied, “What did you call me sir?”

“I called you a dumb shit because that's what you are!”

Leo picked up his helmet and started walking away.

“You shouldn't say things like that sir,” Leo said over his shoulder.

After a brief moment, 10 boys started to walk off with him.

I didn't move. I still don't know why.

The air became electric as the coach watched the boys walk away.

He yelled, he screamed, he sputtered, then he went silent.

Why didn’t I join them?

Of all people, Mulgrew had been meanest to me. I had been the lead shit-disturber in the locker room. And yet I stayed on as the good soldier, the true believer. The boys that had walked away turned around to look at us one last time. I saw the departing boys, 10 of them, turn to see who stayed behind. The ones that left were the core of the team, the best players. A few of the rag tag group that remained behind stood watching. After the rebels left the field, the coach ran us through one drill then quickly said practice was over.

Back in the locker room the two groups met up. To their credit, the rebel group never called us cowards to our faces. The entire team talked about what we'd do next. Finally a meeting was called with the team and principal where we were able to voice our
grievances. The coach was not allowed to speak at the meeting. We had one game left and the entire team was there, but true to form, the coach nastily only played the ones who had stayed behind that morning.

    The rebels had to stay on the side-lines. Strangely, this was the best game I played. I got a touchdown, I didn't fumble the ball and got my first concussion. But this glory was overshadowed by earlier events. I had chickened out when it counted the most, when the others walked off the field.

    The whole affair seemed so far away from those days playing on the street, the ball, a beautiful conical leather spiralling into my hands— it all felt so far from glory.

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**Beatings**

    It’s strange how the moments of violence come back so clearly.

    The time Paul was thrown into the lockers from one end of the corridor to the other. Brian Lloyd beaten by Mr. Krowchuck. Mark’s little red rivulet of blood from his delicate nose. We witnessed these scenes as if they were normal. We lived in fear as our teachers pummelled little boys in front of us.

    Brother Kielly was in charge of the school pop machines. He seemed to take this job more seriously than teaching. He was a husky man, small, but clearly muscular underneath his black robes. His thinning hair was slicked back and he wore wire rimmed glasses. His eyes were the most frightening color of grey—the same color as a mud shark that has just been dragged off from the bottom of the ocean. When angered, his eyes went
from a light grey to a terrible dark. When we saw the eyes take on this quality, we knew someone was going to get hurt.

He also called everyone “Sam” before their last name. ‘Sam Dalton,’ ‘Sam Kenney,’ ‘Sam Cowlig,’ ‘Sam Hill.’ After finding he had created some kind of pun on my name, a small, strange smile would cross his lips then, just as quickly, fade.

He knew when the pop bottles were doing a brisk business and when they were slow. There were three pop dispensers around the school. He would move from one to the other in the course of a day, counting his money and replacing bottles. The pop machines received more care from Kielly than we ever would as students. To this celibate bully, these pop bottles were strange, phallic children. The pop machines were the type where you opened a small thin glass door and bottles were horizontally aligned in front of you.

They were held in a kind of metal harness, waiting for someone to drop in his money and slide the pop out. Paul had found a method of taking the cap off the bottle and draining it with the use of a straw without having to pay. Millions of kids all over the world were doing the same thing, but not all of them had brother Kielly guarding the pop. One day we all gathered around Paul and another boy as they drained a bottle, then someone hissed out “K k . . . Kielly.” Everyone scattered. Only Paul’s accomplice was left in the hall. This child was severely beaten, but didn’t tell on Paul . . . not right away.

That same day, Brother Kielly came into each teacher’s classroom and announced that he would catch and punish the other boy who had stolen the pop. It was characteristic of the school that other teachers didn’t seem to mind Kielly bursting into their classes to threaten children.
Kielly finished by asking each class if the guilty party would like to stand up. He would go easy on him if the child told the truth, but the punishment would be much greater if the boy waited. Paul waited. Paul had older brothers that had attended the school . . . each had been beaten by Kielly. They weren’t pretty stories. So Paul was going to deny his role in the affair as long as he could.

But Paul’s accomplice could not hold out past the next morning. He named Paul, and brother Kielly came to Paul’s class right away. His eyes were dark grey.

“Sam Cowlig,” he barked. He then took Paul outside into the hallway.

“Did you drain the pop?” he asked, spittle forming on his lips.

“No brother,” Paul said as he thought of his own brothers.

Kielly slapped him across the face.

“Did you take the pop?”

“No brother”—another smack, harder this time, with a closed fist.

Realizing that his response was not achieving the desired effect. Paul responded ‘yes’ to the third inquiry. Here Kielly’s eyes went to an even darker grey and he grabbed Paul by the lapels and started to throw him against the lockers. He swabbed Paul up and down the hall smashing him into the hard metal and locks. Paul later said that he would not allow himself to feel the pain that the blows about the face were causing him. He transported himself into some adrenaline-induced trance to blank out the face and hands before him.

Paul came back into the class, his clothes dishevelled, but with a hint of Cowley Irish pride. Another of the famous sons had been beaten by Kielly and survived. I always...
wondered how I would have behaved under an onslaught of such intensity. I knew I would cry.

We always knew when someone was going to get hurt. The air would crackle when violence was near. The teachers would try to carry on, but our ears were tuned to the sound of a boy’s body bouncing off the walls, no matter how far away.

Sometimes the beatings weren’t taken out into the halls, like the time Mr. Barton flattened Mark’s beautiful nose. Mark had a very fine nose—not agreeable, but pointed. It actually came to a fine point like the tip of a ballpoint pen. He had flaring nostrils that he could open to amazing widths, but the end of the nose itself was dainty and delicate.

Mark was often late or absent. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Mark spent more time in the coffee shop of the Hotel Georgia (he lived in North Van and would stop for refreshments on his way to school) than he did in math class. Brother Kielly, on one of his kinder days, quipped, “Who’s the new boy?” as Mark strode into his second math class of the year, mid-November. Mark escaped from that scene unscathed, but he was not so lucky with Mr. Barton.

Cam Barton was a huge, stupid man. He was the senior football coach and also had a teaching load. But to say he was a teacher would be much too generous. He taught *Lord of the Flies* strictly according to Coles Notes. Reading from this literary sourcebook, he would drone, “The sun is a symbol of the boy’s fiery, passionate natures,” imagine this in the tones of a Cro-Magnon man. When we questioned how some of these symbols applied to our reading of the text, Barton would yell, “The sun is a goddamn symbol, okay? Just write that down!” His neck was the width of his thigh.
Mark had decided, (who knows why?) to attend one of Barton's afternoon lectures on the classic novel. He had a desk reserved especially for him at the very front of the class and I was placed right behind him. Mark’s demeanour in class usually consisted of running intellectual circles around the teachers or pounding the bejesus out of nearby classmates. I was in the process of paying Mark back for a beating he had given me in the previous class by inking up the back of his neck with my pen. Mr. Barton was at the board and was writing out one of the gems from Coles Notes, when Mark turned around. “I’ll have your balls for breakfast,” he softly intoned. A thin smile played over Mark’s lips, his eyes dangerous with determination.

Barton, although slow mentally, was physically quick. He saw Mark turn towards me. Before I could respond to Mark’s taunt, I was looking up at Barton's huge bulk hovering over my classmate. Mark quickly turned around and Barton struck—a closed fist straight at his nose. I heard a small crunch, and what happened next will always stay with me.

Mark turned around to me again. A fine, beautiful rivulet of blood trickled down from his lovely nose. The blood was the deep color of purple-red. But it was his expression that amazed me. Remembering this scene now, I suddenly think of Macbeth. There is a scene where one of Macduff’s children is stabbed by a murderer. The child, after being stabbed, turns to his mother and says, “He has killed me mother.” Mark seemed to be saying the same thing with his seemingly innocent eyes.

Barton, who seemed a bit taken aback by the blood, gathered up as much sympathy as he could saying, “Go to the goddamn can and get cleaned up and get back here quick.”
Mark left and came back quickly to show off his transformation into a man. Then he skipped the next few weeks of school.

My worst memory was when Mr. Krowchuck beat up Brian Lloyd. Krowchuck was born in Flin Flon Manitoba. He had played for the hockey team there, “The Flin Flon Flyers.” He was brawny and bore a striking resemblance to my father. He had a kind face, but he was a brutal teacher. Parents respected him because he was tough. He had his lower left leg amputated the year before due to cancer and he limped around the room releasing air from a valve on the side of his leg.

I could never figure out the mechanics of this air release, but his anger and frustration seemed to be connected to the build-up of pressure on his leg and the eventual release. The anger seemed to come from the part of him that had been carved away and it increased his rage.

With these teachers you never knew when friendly camaraderie would turn to nastiness. Krowchuck was particularly hard to read. One moment you would be nervously joking with him, and then suddenly he would turn and berate you for being a sissy. One day after kidding with the class, he touched Brian Lloyd in a friendly way on the shoulder while walking up the aisle. Brian responded in a semi-jest, “Get your hand off me,” he said teasingly. The air went silent with the words. Then, there was a slow hissing sound from his leg.

Krowchuck went white, “What did you say?”

“I said get your hands off me sir, ha, ha.” Brian tried to make it seem as innocent as possible.

Krowchuck strode to the front of the room.
“Get up here Lloyd,’ he yelled.

“Sir, I didn’t mean—”

“I said get up here Lloyd!”

“But sir . . .”

“NOW Lloyd!”

Brian went to the front, shying from a possible fist.

Krowchuck growled, ‘You think you’re a big boy don’t you?’

“No sir…”

“C’mon then big boy, you take a piece out of me, c’mon.”

“Sir I di… didn’t mean to.” Brian's voice now like a little boy’s.

“C’mon Lloyd, you take the first shot.”

This of course was an invitation to be mutilated, because as soon as you touched the teacher, he had the right to kill you.

Brian, knowing this, didn’t budge.

Then Krowchuck went after him.

Now Brian was big, perhaps 6 feet, but he was thrown over four desks as if he were a sack of potatoes. I remember ducking to get out the way as Brian went flying past me. With Krowchuck's leg diagonally out to one side, he charged down to get Brian and threw him over a few more desks. The whole time he was yelling, “C’mon Lloyd, you take a piece out of me, c’mon.”

Brian finally lay in a heap on the floor, and the room went quiet. After the pause, all we heard was the sound of air releasing from Krowchuck's leg. We were told to straighten up the desks so that we could go on with our tasks. He hobbled to the front of
the room. As he passed, the smell of sweat and pipe smoke idled by our desks. We didn’t dare look at our fellow student crumpled on the floor.

The rage in these men was immense. Their eyes would go glassy as they acted out some scene they remembered from their past. We had to sit through these scenes again and again intrinsically becoming a part of them each time. Do we still act them out on others?

I often wonder at the rigidity of my arguments with my wife. I never hit, but I get bull-headed when I get mad. Was I taught all those years ago that this is how men behave?

I saw Brian at a reunion at the old school 20 years later and after a few beer we talked about that beating. Here he was, a grown man, 20 years later, still with a hate on for that teacher. On the way out of the reunion, we walked down the stairs and into the night air. By the exit door, near the coke machine there was a burly figure in a baseball cap sliding bottles in.

“Wouldn’t it be funny . . .” I thought as we walked by. The figure turned around. Those grey eyes full of rage and fear looked out at me from underneath the baseball cap . . . it was Kielly. Like old mud sharks from the bottom of the sea, these faces never die.

The Priest And I

My sexual education with girls and boys began under the guidance of the Catholic Church. It started in grade ten. The rest of the class had gone on a weekend religious retreat. I had to attend a family wedding, so I missed out. I didn't mind, as retreats tended to be tortuous weekends of guilt and prayer. James Joyce went into the subject at some
length in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Things hadn't changed much by 1970. Usually, visions of hell and damnation were strung like so many sugarplums across little boys’ imaginations. Spots on our souls were either large-mortal sins, or small-vanial sins. In either case, we were toast. We were going to hell for eternity or purgatory for 1000 years. These cheery thoughts were usually doled out to us by priests and Christian brothers.

Nevertheless, I still hated the idea that my class was going somewhere I was not. I felt jealous as I said goodbye to my two pals, Greg and Paul, as they boarded the bus for the retreat. They had each promised me gossip when they got home. I was most interested in Greg's analysis because he had such a keen verbal knife when it came to slicing up our fellow classmates.

After the retreat was over, I phoned him expecting to get some good stories on who drank the communion wine behind the priest’s back. I began by asking Greg about one of our common enemies—a pretentious West Van pretty boy with far too much money by the name of O'Rourke. But Greg replied in a strange tone, “O'Rourke's not such a bad guy you know.”

“What?” I said, still expecting the axe to fall on O'Rourke's head. It never did.

“Really,” Greg said, “he's okay. He really contributed to the group.”

The what? “The group” took on a mysterious quality, as Greg told me how everything ‘came together’ during the final mass. I still couldn't believe it. Greg? The guy who would sooner slit his throat than go to mass, was extolling the subtleties of the Eucharist. I went through every goat in the class and Greg had the same response, “He’s a really nice guy you know.”
Paul said much the same. They were both impressed with the new school counsellor, Father John Nelson. Nelson was a priest. He could serve mass and hear confessions, but he also listened to our problems. He was youngish, perhaps 35, when he first came to the school. He had a potbelly and thinning black hair that he combed over his bald spot. His most distinctive feature was his eyes. They could take on a Rasputin-like glow when provoked. He also had that unfortunate habit of producing spittle on his upper lip when he got excited.

He was officially the high school counsellor for all Catholic schools in Vancouver. During the one day a week he spent at our school, I’d see him in deep discussions with other students in his little office off the main corridor.

It was interesting that the school had a priest as a counsellor. How could he ever understand what we were going through as young hormonally challenged teenaged boys? Perhaps, in a bizarre way, he was going through exactly the same things as us. He was liberal in his outlook and seemed to know things, that is, he appeared to have been educated. He gave me encouraging, but not familiar looks as we passed in the halls.

I was able to go on my first retreat in the spring. John had rented a large room in a motel at Pitt Lake. On the Friday evening with the lights low, the 20 boys talked about their feelings. This was nothing like the retreats of old, with their sackcloth and repentance. This night at Pitt Lake, we sat in a circle on the floor. I can't quite remember the focus of the talk, but Nelson moved the discussion along by reflecting, or repeating back, what each boy said. Today, we know this as Rogerian or reflective counselling, but at the time it seemed as if he were crystallizing each student's thoughts into a beautiful design.
“So you feel that you are often misunderstood at home,” his voice would calmly drift across the room. It was as if we wanted to hear and understand each other as well. It was rare for any of us to be listened to so completely. Our mood soon became mildly euphoric. It was a very calm, beautiful evening. I can still recall the lights coming on after the session and students moving off the floor in slow motion, looking at each other in wonder. This was nothing like our previous retreats of porridge, humiliation and prayer. The year was 1970, before Charles Manson, the Moonies, Kent State or Jonestown had completely soured what was left of the summers of love. There was a general feeling that things were changing for the better. Revolution was still in the air, and, in our own little way, we felt a part of a movement. The general philosophy was to do things differently than they had been done before. Being on this retreat seemed part of the bigger movement. It felt finally like we were going to be part of our own latter day Woodstock.

Assisting Nelson on the retreat were two young women from another school, Sharon and Maria. Having two girls along for the weekend made the whole affair much more interesting. In previous retreats the closest thing we got to a woman was the statue of the Virgin Mary. But these two young women were eating, talking and sleeping in close proximity to us. They were two years older and seemed to have an inner fire that was very attractive.

It’s important to remember that we were from a Catholic boy’s school. If we saw females at all they were usually nuns or our mothers. We lacked the opportunity to turn our desires toward real human beings. To have these girls along for the retreat meant only one thing: we had to hide our erections for the entire weekend.
Saturday was spent in small group discussions about love, loss, God etc., but the evening session was different. Nelson insisted that we now listen to him. He talked about his feelings. We started to talk about ours. Then he got mad. The spittle started to appear. He wanted us to listen to him this time. The young women started to use the reflection technique with Nelson. We realized that the tables had been turned and basically we just wanted the guy to stop getting mad, so we clumsily tried to mirror back what he said. We clumsily tried reflective listening and Nelson seemed to calm down. It is obvious now that this was a carefully choreographed script using subtle brainwashing, but at the time we felt like we’d stumbled on something important.

On the Sunday there was a final get-together and mass. We went home feeling cleansed and religious. Our parents were happy with the result. We were full of the milk of human kindness.

I loved my fellow classmates for two whole days before the divisions of class and envy took hold again. I went back to liking some people and hating others.

Then, the whole experience started to go slowly sideways. I became more involved with John Nelson through a strange questionnaire. Students in my grade had been asked to choose three people they would invite to a party. We all filled out our forms and handed them in. A week later, John asked me into his office.

I arrived, not sure what dark secrets he was going to pull out of me. He showed me a large piece of paper with many numbers on it. He said that each number represented a boy in my class. Each number had three lines in blue, black and red heading to other numbers. John reminded me of the questionnaire and showed me my number. It appeared that while I wasn't many people's first choice, that I was frequently a second or third. I
had attempted in my first year at the school to not throw myself at the feet of the in-crowd and had created friendships that were less susceptible to the whims of the power group. Sitting in his office, looking at the swirling lines on his big sheet of paper, John saw that my head had been swelled enough to be drawn into his plans. It was classic cult recruitment. “You could be very helpful to our retreat program,” he said as his great round eyes bore down on me. I stuttered, “Yes,” I would like to help out.

My father had died three years earlier; I was 13 when he was taken overnight by a heart attack. While I attempted to appear normal to my friends and family, I was lost without him. Perhaps, I imagined, I could find a replacement in this older man, this interesting, ‘safe’ priest.

That year John bought some land near Pitt Lake and began building a cabin. He was soon able to run retreats every second weekend on this property. A year passed and I had been a student helper on a number of retreats. In the same way that the two young women had been invited on our boy's retreat, I went along on the girls' retreats. My friend Paul was also involved in these weekends. For two boys to spend the weekend with 30 private school girls in the same cabin was wonderful beyond words. We'd see them in the morning in their little teddies and at night in their tee shirts languishing around the main room. I had always been shy and could never talk to girls at dances and parties. But at the retreats, under the guise of religion, I was able to converse endlessly about God, music, sex, and sensitivity. One night, I played Donovan’s “Lalena” on the guitar with a silly vibrato in my voice. I imagined that I saw two girls swoon.

It was great getting out of town, driving for an hour and meeting an entirely new crop of private school girls. I still remember being back at school after one of these
retreats. It was a particularly dull, rainy day and I was feeling somewhat depressed. I was told by one of the teachers that there was mail for me down in the office. It was from three of the girls that had been on the retreat the previous weekend. The letters were heart-shaped and full of kind sentiments. I remember the glee I felt showing them to Paul. I felt I had finally arrived in a world that included girls.

This was the best part of the entire experience. I loved going away every second weekend, driving up to Pitt Lake in an old white Datsun pick-up truck. I wasn’t sure what was going on in John’s head, but he was kind and, to a boy who had lost his father, attentive.

The cabin that John was building was strange. It was one enormous long room, with windows that faced the lake. John, and his right hand man, Terry, a muscle bound youth of Dutch decent, scoured city dumps and roadsides for the materials to construct the interior of the cabin. The fireplace for instance, was a collection of shale that had fallen off the mountains behind the cabin. They put a waterfall through this rockwork so you could see the fire in the grate and water pouring through a crevice at the same time. Of course there was also a kind of pond in the cabin to collect the waterfall’s runoff. It was a strange, wonderful, free place that in no way resembled our homes back in Vancouver.

After a year of these retreats, John decided to take the game up a notch. Paul and I were a group of 12 students from around the city that acted as assistants on these retreats. Depending on the group, John would ask us up to Pitt Lake to show others how to 'do' reflective listening. When there was no retreat, we would often go up to Pitt Lake to help John build the cabin. This group of 12 became very close. There were six boys and six
girls and John. We would discuss upcoming retreats, work on our listening skills, serve
mass, build the cabin, sing, eat, and sleep in the one large room of the semi-built cabin.
John had purchased foam mattresses and we would throw them on the floor prior to going
to sleep and listen to lovely music as we drifted off to sleep. We were always aware that
we were camping out with members of the opposite sex.

Back then, the word “cult” wasn’t used as often as it is these days. I think that’s
why so many young people became trapped in them. Our group was happily under the
direction of a charismatic spiritual leader who got us involved in activities that satisfied
our pleasure principles. What could be wrong with that?

One evening, while Maria, myself, and two other students were at the cabin, John
discussed more sensual pursuits. He suggested that, given the right conditions, a couple
could enjoy a sensual experience more deeply if they could discuss and be reflected while
touching each other. This struck us as odd, but John assured us it was okay. He said that
as long as there was no passion, as long as we kept things in the “cognitive realm,” then it
wouldn’t be sexual, but rather, sensual.

Maria and I went for a walk that evening and discussed John's proposal. She had a
sexuality that I found very attractive. As the old blues singer, Blind Blake so aptly put it,
“She had a special kind of quiver, makes a strong man lose his mind.” On our walk she
suggested we try John’s proposal. We talked about this for a while. I remember having
the shakes. We kissed tentatively, then with more passion. I remember touching her
breasts through her white sweater—a new experience for me. These moments were
interspersed with brief, “That feels nice” and me using reflective listening, “You find the
experience is pleasing.” This exchange was clearly ridiculous, but whatever it took to
keep my hand on her breast was okay with me. I would say anything at that point. The jitters started to subside as the discussion and softness of her breast seem to calm me down. I remember it as a lovely spring night. Later, alone on my foam mattress, I tried to keep things in the cognitive.

Now, what is wrong with this picture? A young man and woman out on a spring night? No, nothing wrong there. But young man and woman encouraged by a Catholic priest to grope each other and talk about it? This was not exactly what the Pope had meant by liberalizing the church.

John then decided to turn this core group into committed members ready to experiment with new ideas. We got together every weekend and John would have us work with more intensity on honesty and sensuality. If two people got together in a sensual way, there would be little sexuality or passion involved. As the group progressed, so did the level of intensity. And the web of the cult started to tighten.

Imagine this scene: We are in the large room at the cabin. There are 12 people lying around, two in the middle of the circle. The couple can be boy/girl or boy/boy or girl/girl. The two people begin by lying very close to each other. They start by talking about their relationship. In most cases they say extremely positive things about each other. They might discuss how they perceived the person when they first met them, how they have always admired their humour, honesty, grace, etc.

As they get closer, they start to touch each other and kiss. After each embrace, the couple talks about how they feel. Someone in the outer group then reflects what the person is saying. “You feel incredibly close to her/ him right now,” or, “His lips feel very soft.” The rest of the group is watching as if observing a warm-blooded experiment. The
couple might take off pieces of their clothing. There never seems to be clumsiness—just anticipation. Everyone gets a chance to be with somebody else. There is never a sexual drive to these experiences.

Because the participants are always brought back to a cognitive level by the verbal reflections, there never seems to be any passion: just soft sensuality.

At the end of this session the group would discuss the experience, then we would repeat the session with two other people. After this, we got ready for bed.

Then we paired off, this time in the dark. I remember getting the foam mattresses out and all of us choosing another person to sleep with. John usually slept in the back room. One night, I paired off with Eileen, a girl two years older than me. She had recovered from polio but still used crutches. What were the chances that I would have spent an evening with a disabled girl had I not been in this group? My Westside, “winner take all” upbringing would never have allowed me to consider someone less than able-bodied, yet there we were. It was the softest, most wonderful experience I can remember from that time. We would often put music on before going to sleep and that night it was the slow movement from Beethoven's ninth symphony. Eileen was like a line of music in her gestures; she was soft, fluid, and sensitive. We did a kind of horizontal dance together that I will never forget. And we were surrounded by five other couples doing the same thing.

That evening was my happiest memory, like the peak before the decline. All the energy spent by John to get the group together, all the diplomacy with our parents, all the bafflegab about psychology and religion, seemed to have a darker side. Part of this darkness came from John's needs.
One time, I went to Pitt Lake just with John to work on the cabin. I had been told that others would be coming, but they didn’t.

In some ways I liked this as there was an unspoken hierarchy in the group and I felt as if I was moving up an invisible ladder to the centre of power. During the ride up to Pitt Lake, there seemed to be a tension in the air between us. After a late dinner we laid out the mattresses in the room in front of the fireplace. It was that night that John first jumped me. I woke up with him turning me over, in a rushed, frantic fashion.

He started kissing me and forcing his tongue into my mouth. The rough quality of his whiskers is still real to me. I imagine that my response was less than encouraging. This wasn't the soft sensuality of the group experience, but the rush of sexual urgency. I've never been very responsive when roused from sleep, and while I don't remember saying “no,” John must have gotten the hint. In the morning, nothing was said. There were no reflective responses, no discussion of the experience. His urge seemed to come from another place. A place I didn’t want to go.

Now knowing that John had this agenda, I’m surprised that I didn’t back away from the whole enterprise. But I didn’t. I worked on some other retreats, continued going to meetings with the ‘group of twelve' and saw John around the school. Then, two months later, he asked me to go with him to the cabin again. Strangely, I went. John woke me up again. This time he pushed his erect penis between my legs from behind. I somehow felt that I had to put up with this. I felt as if I owed him. Perhaps because John was a friend; perhaps, in a completely twisted way, because he was a priest. I again told him no, that I was sleepy.
He never pushed himself any further on me. I guess he was waiting for a kinder response, but never got one. Why did I go back a second time alone with John?

Perhaps he was courting me and I enjoyed the attention. Perhaps I wanted to see if it would happen again. I was still stuck in this notion that I was gaining more power in the group.

John hadn’t buggered me. I had touched his erect penis and, aside from noticing the warmth it provided, I had no desire to go any further. While I admired John, he didn’t turn me on.

I talked with Paul about this later and he described similar experiences with John. I suppose all the boys that he had involved in his project were jumped once or twice. Was he recruiting us for the priesthood or was it something else? One can only wonder. In the end it was about power, not community; control, not compassion. This then, was the strange underbelly of the retreat experience. I had the opportunity to meet nice girls from Catholic schools, but I also had to spend the odd weekend alone with a horny priest.

Near the end, John tried to start a private counselling agency. We hosted a few workshops up at Pitt Lake for some workers in the helping professions, but these people always seemed sceptical and never bought into our ideas with the right evangelical fervour.

We had better luck with high school students. We ran a recruitment of sorts with some of the Catholic high schools. I remember one time when we were working with a very nice group of young women from Little Flower Academy. We wanted them to join in our group. In the same way that Pitt Lake had pursued Paul and I, we were excited to have these young girls under our control. We too became predators.
As new people became involved there was some debate about our motives. Someone must have looked at the whole mess and said that it had nothing to do with Catholic teachings. The Church is not as stupid as it sometimes seems, and it wasn't long before John was discovered. Archbishop Carney got word that people were taking their clothes off at Father Nelson's cabin up at Pitt Lake.

John was defrocked, and the rest of us scattered. I quickly became involved with my first great love affair and hid out at the university. Paul became a manager at a Bootlegger store. Two years later we sat together in a parking lot, smoked a joint, and tried to figure out what happened. To this day, on fishing trips where we catch no fish, Paul and I try to make sense of those days. We insist that we would never trade the experience for another, that it was too rich, too interesting to ever give up. And yet our confusion never goes away. Last we heard, John had changed his name to George, left the priesthood and was living in the West End.

People have asked how this story ends: What happened to the priest? My answer is always the same: He disappeared. The truth really was he never really went away—we did. We wanted nothing to do with him. I imagined in horror, but with some interest, that I would run into him on the street, his strange eyes peering at me behind a homeless face.

Then, 20 years later, Paul and I went for a drive in the Fraser Valley. Paul was always more positive about our Pitt Lake experiences than I was. My analysis had become darker over the years. We were both surprised that we never grew tired of talking about it.

“So was it all a big set-up to get us to go there with him,” I said.
Paul was still unsure, “No, nobody could be that sick. I learned a lot from John and think of all the girl action we got.”

“But maybe that was just the bait . . . to get us to the point where we would go up there and be alone with him.”

“No, that’s too weird.”

We drove on in silence. Then Paul looked at me and said, “You know what we should do? We should go up there and visit him.”

“Are you nuts? I never want to go to that place again.”

“C’mon we could talk to him . . . now that we know.”

“I’m too scared. I sometimes think I see him on the street and I feel weird. It was like after my dad died, I thought I saw him everywhere and dreamed about him. It’s sort of the same thing with John, but in a scary way.”

Then Paul, sensing I was emotional, tried some reflective listening on me, “So you feel in some ways as if John and your dad . . .”

“Don’t fucking reflect me! Don’t fucking repeat after me.”

“So you’d rather I didn’t repeat . . .”

“DON’T EVEN JOKE! I HATE THAT SHIT NOW. I HEAR PEOPLE DO IT AND IT MAKES ME WANT TO PUKE.”

“Ok, ok.. jeez I just . . .”

I was still upset,” Don’t fucking . . . Don’t you see what that bastard did? He took away our youth. He fucking set it all up . . . The girls, the questionnaire . . . He just wanted young boys in a cabin with him. He was a fucking freak. We’ll never forget this shit as long as we live.”
“Ok... Ok... ok... But I still say we learned some great stuff.”

“Yeah sure, but how do you unlearn all that other stuff? It was all one great manipulation. Maybe that’s all I learned to do.”

Paul persisted, “So that’s why we should go to Pitt Lake - just to get it out of our system. To see if it fits our memory.”

There was a long pause. Why not? “Maybe you’re right... sure let’s go, we’re not far right?”

“Only about 20 minutes. Let’s go.”

It was a beautiful early spring day, and the lake, while cold and austere, was lovely as we drove up the little road towards John’s cabin. As we approached, we saw a sign “Educational Resources Institute” at the top of the driveway. This had John’s unmistakable style about it. After much discussion, Paul and I decided to walk down the 50 meters of the driveway to check if he was there. The cabin had changed. There was a new addition, but the section where most of the retreats took place seemed intact. With much queasiness we knocked on the door once, then twice. No response. Beside the house was a car with Washington plates.

It seemed that no one was there, so we walked around the front between the house and the lake to get a quick peek of the view we knew so well. Then a voice came from behind the house. A man approached us. He was the right size, a huge potbelly, a purple sweatshirt, his hair not grey but strangely yellow. It was the right look for an off-duty priest or pedophile. I couldn’t help but notice that something that looked like a shot-spot arched across the front of his purple sweatshirt.

“How can I help you gentlemen?” he said in tones mostly defensive.
“Hi John, it’s Peter Hill and Paul Cowlig. We just came by to visit.”

His eyes grew large. Like a man caught in a lie, he began to speak rapidly of his business, his centre for learning, his workshops. Much the same way he always had. There were no niceties. No “how are you?” He rambled, but seemed, as he spoke, to realize who we were. Then he made the connection.

“My, Peter, you used to be so lanky.”

“Well, I’m as tall as I once was,” I responded stupidly.

He strangely seemed to fix on me, almost turning his back on Paul. I felt again the strange influence he used to have. We made small talk about the house. He invited us in.

The old part of the cabin was the same. The fireplace was still a strange series of shale facades with a waterfall.

“Has anyone been by? Have you seen Terry or Maria?” we asked.

“You are the first people from that gang that I’ve seen in 20 years,” he said a voice critical yet pitiful. Around the room were collection of small porcelain dolls, milk jugs, and dogs. Most were the size of a human fist. In each collection there were at least 50 of each form.

“So John, I see you’ve been busy collecting.”

“Oh you know, garage sales. Things like that keep me busy.”

I felt numb; I mentioned that I was a teacher, that I had a wife and child.

Paul let slip that he was in real estate. John went to get some materials for his educational institutes that were especially tailored for real estate agents.
Seeing my chance, I moved quickly out the front door towards the lake. There, as I looked out, I had a very strong sense of my father. I must have mourned for him there as a young 16-year old and those memories rushed back to me.

As John and Paul came out to join me, I thought that I needed to tell him this. “You know that time we were here, I remember being real fucked-up about my dad ‘s death.”

“Yes, it was a hard time for you,” he said as a reflection. In the silence that followed, Paul looked out at the lake then asked how the whole retreat thing came crashing down.

“Oh, it was Father McInally and the Archbishop. They were always against us. They didn’t like me teaching psychology to young people.”

“Psychology,” I thought, “that is one weird way of looking at it.” Then Paul spoke, “It was a rather radical approach.”

“Yes,” John parried, “we brought boys and girls together and the church found that threatening.”

“That’s not all you brought together,” I thought. Paul knew it was time to leave or we might never get away. I felt trapped, glued to the spot, unable to speak my mind or move. Numb. I wanted to leave. I had to get free.

“Well, it’s been great seeing you, but we’ve got to run,” Paul tugged at my coat. John spoke again about a new project and how they had a great site on the Internet.

“Are either of you connected to the Internet yet?” I shook my head no, but Paul chimed in, “I’m not, but Peter is always talking about it.” I felt as if I were falling through space.
I stammered, “Well we were, but it was so dangerous for our daughter, we decided to cancel it,” I lied. That was all I needed, John to be reconnecting with me through the Internet. The shot spot on his sweatshirt seemed to glow at me.

With that, we said goodbye, had one last look at the cavernous eyes and walked up the driveway.

Barely able to keep our voices in check, we stifled small screams as we ran the last 20 feet to the car. We got in and turned around fast. We were like two kids that had been caught shoplifting but got off free. By chance, my wife rang on the cell phone as we pulled away. We saw John from a distance close his door.

“When are you guys coming home?” she asked.

“It’ll be a while,” I said, “we’re still out on Pitt Lake.”

We looked back at the cabin and peeled out of there.

We did get out fast, but this many years later, I feel like I’m still stuck out at that goddamn lake.

Poem One - Father

And you my father . . .
At this age, 49,
Walking this same path . . .
You were building the sun deck
at the cabin that year
Did you think
As you sat on the deck after it was finished
That last summer
Looking up at the stars
That you’d never see another?
Did you know?

All the young fathers taken early
Pushed by big families
And Big American Dreams
That pushed the heart
Over the cliff, never to return

You’re gone and I, now a few days past your death date,
Am afraid now
As if walking in a minefield
When will I be struck down?

Yet amazingly I also see each flower that you
Didn’t see past your 49th year
As if it were some strange competition that I’ve won
Finally now, some 40 years later

Yet how I missed you
And memories of you that appear in my dreams

One afternoon
On the beach, the sun going down
playing between the shadows
the trees cast on the water
The small pebbles underfoot
We wrestled in the waves
My dreams of superheroes
fresh from Marvel comics
In our massive battle.
It was Titanic in its proportion
You were the Hulk,
I was Thor
as we threw each other into the water
You were laughing
Taking joy in my power
And my imagination
I was 13,
You let me be the man that day.
Then you left 6 months later
Taken overnight by a heart attack
While the children slept

They asked us
If we wanted to see you lying in state
I remember being alone
An uncle took me

I went into the funeral parlour
I approached the open casket
There you were, painted up,
No longer the Hulk, or a super hero
But drained of life blood
As I knelt and cried.

It’s your fault after all
You taught me to dream
To imagine
You allowed me to see beyond the world
so how was I to behave
With you dead before me?
For a ‘brief, shining moment’ I was what I was
Then, seeing you
Already missing you,
In a lifetime of missing you.
I’ve been trying to find you,
And that moment,
That conjunction of now and love and self ever since . . .

But really, I hardly knew you
We were together for so short a time
For many years I dreamed I would see you on the street
As if you had run away, not died
You would come back and tell us you had lived in the States, a broken man
You would come back a stranger
Not interested in us now
I would finally see you for who you really were,
Not that golden afternoon

Not a saint
But a failed man that cut and ran
You would come back
But ask to be left alone as you had another life now

I don’t have those dreams these days
I’m older than you now
(Despite the fact that I still feel like I’m thirteen)
I’ve won the battle, this hollow victory
And now I must wade into the uncertain twilight of my years
A ghostly half world, to meet my death
Finally, without you.
Glue

I ran up Hastings Street, sidestepping drunks, knowing I was late for work. An old drunk with a huge bulbous nose watched me as I hurried up the street, “Run, you bastard!” the old man cursed as I rushed by. I never knew my reception would be so harsh; after all, I was there to help. But this afternoon, I was a little behind my time as I had spent too long over my clam chowder at the Only Seafood restaurant. So I hurried past Columbia Street toward Main.

As a child, I had travelled these streets by bus on the way to the PNE. I would look out at the lost souls, faces down in the gutter and wonder what kind of world this really was. It was my yearly excursion to the dreaded east side. Now here I was, a social worker in an alternate school for native youth—helping.

I hurried past ground zero—Main and Hastings—past the liquor store on Hastings where most of the drunks hung out. I got to Gore Avenue and went through the doors of the First United Church where the school was in a room at the back. There were 10 cubicles for the ten potential students that would show up. All the students were First Nations, but from different parts of the province: Alert Bay, Lytton, the Charlottes and the Musqueam reserve.

I made it into the room with a minute to spare, but it didn’t matter. None of the students were there except one. Dolly was always in her spot at the last cubicle, waiting to learn. “I’ll be with you in a second Dolly,” I said as I got my cup of coffee.

The other students came in five minutes later.

“You guys are late,” I admonished them as they strolled in.
“Fuck you man!” This was Mike, the eldest of the bunch.

“That’s fine Mike, grab your chair,” I knew not to pick a fight.

“Don’t tell me what to do you honky bastard.”

The other students chortled at this exchange as they slowly got into their chairs. I moved around the room making sure each student was at least getting out a book.

Then it hit me—the smell of glue.

They’d been at it again, out back with a plastic bag and a cheap tube of glue bought at the corner store.

As I moved from chair to chair, I smelled it on at least five of the kids.

Sally, four months pregnant, was a lovely girl, but horribly stoned. She looked up at me with glazed, sullen eyes.

“Try to do this math question Sally. I’ll come back in a second.”

“Whatever man,” she smiled and looked down at the book. I imagine it must have been swimming uncontrollably in front of her eyes. I had to turn away, not only because of the tragedy of the situation, but because the smell of the glue was so strong.

I stayed away from the students who had imbibed until the smell of the glue wore off. The afternoon was easier than the morning. They had to ‘work’ for an hour before recreation.

They loved volleyball. Somehow the effects of the glue would be gone by this point and the students would engage in a highly competitive game.

I was especially impressed with Rick- a student with incredible communication skills and a great serve. As the girls in the class told it, “He could tell you anything and you’d believe it.”
I had seen him the day before on Hastings where Rick had opened his arms wide and said to me, “I’m the king of this place, man. You ask me anything and I’ll get it for you.” Rick wasn’t a glue-sniffer, but he’d sit with the other kids while they got high. And here he was in the gym, jumping high, spiking the ball with incredible speed and skill. Surprisingly, Mike was the second best player. As often as Rick would spike it, Mike would somehow retrieve it and save the point. I imagined that Mike had sniffed more glue than any of the other kids, but he was the star of that show.

Halfway through the game, Bill, the native worker, came into the gym. Bill was one of the native workers who actually was native. He came from the Mount Curry reserve. He was quiet, proud and highly intuitive. As the game wound down, Bill called the students over to him.

“It looks like the Native summer camp is going to happen,” he announced quietly. The students seemed excited.

“We got the grant from the government. You guys are going to be the camp counsellors.”

“Where are the little kids going to come from?” Rick asked.

“From this neighbourhood and some from Mount Currie. You guys will be up there for two weeks then get a week off, then stay up there for another two weeks.”

The students looked at each other. Some with dread, some with excitement. While many had come from up country, they’d been tied to the city for years.

“How much do we get paid?” asked Mike.

Bill looked him in the eye and gave him a warm smile, “The money’s good; $325 a week.”
This was great money, and the students started to talk in a fast, excited way. The next few days were spent advertising the camp to convince the parents of the neighbourhood to let the students attend the camp.

Then we got our supplies together and headed up to Mount Currie. Tensions were high in those days, as the American Indian Movement (A.I.M.) had just taken down a blockade around the reserve. There was a famous picture in the Vancouver Sun of two bloods pointing a shotgun at the photographer. Luckily, or unluckily, for me the blockade had come down, so we spent the night in Mount Currie.

We went up to the camp, an hour’s drive into the mountains past Mount Currie. It was on Indian land and had three cabins, one in good shape. The others were covered in brambles like something out of Sleeping Beauty. We got out the machetes and cut away at brambles for two days. At night we sat around and quietly complained about our blisters. I have to admit, I did fancy myself as the “great white machete wielder” who would show them how to work hard. In the end, it only hurt me more as I had more blisters on my hands than anyone. It was wild country and the Skookumchuck rapids ran close beside the camp. Once we finished cleaning the camp, we went back to pick up the Mount Currie counsellors and the first set of little kids.

The city folks and the Mount Currie folks partied that night. I hid upstairs in the attic trying to sleep through a party the likes of which I’d never heard before.

I was in better shape than most as I started to pack the truck for the day’s trip to the camp. “Slow down you fucking honkey, you’re making too much noise,” Mike said as his morning salutation.

“But shouldn’t we be getting . . .”
“We shouldn’t be doing anything but fucking waking up,” Rick said. The party from the night before was exacting its revenge on them.

A few hours later we’d rousted everyone off the various chairs and corners of the room and got in the truck.

One of the Mount Currie counsellors, Vernon, was a bit older than the others, perhaps in his mid-twenties. He looked at me hard as we drove up in the back of the pick up truck. He continued to drink from a bottle and gave me his hard stare.

We got to the place where Bill was waiting with the boat and we ferried the kids and the supplies over to the Indian land where the cabins and the camp were. Then Rick ferried Bill to his truck as he had to go back to town for more supplies.

It was mid-afternoon and the supplies were being unloaded from the boat. As I passed Colin, the other white teacher, I asked, “Have you got any idea what’s bugging Vernon?”

“Don’t let it bother you, he’s still pissed from last night.”

And yet he didn’t seem drunk, he just looked pale and surly.

As we finished loading the supplies into the camp house, Rick came up to me and gave me the shells for the .303 rifle.

“Take these, and don’t let them go; we’re just going round the point to catch fish.”

This pissed me off, because there was so much more to do in the camp. The new kids would have to get settled, dinner prepared and general unpacking was still to be done. But they took off anyway and Colin hung out with the girls, putting food away. We
were the only people in the camp. Vernon stayed behind and continued making gruff noises. Suddenly he became alert when he noticed the shells to the rifle.

“Give me those,” he said. And I did, thinking that by trusting him, his grudge against me would drop. He left quickly. Ten minutes later I heard the first blast.

It was loud, louder than most things I’d heard. I moved outside to see Vernon swaying, while taking aim at a can on a pole. The air rattled and I saw some children running towards the kitchen house, frightened by the noise from the gun.

“Crash” another release, then another. We decided we’d better talk with him, so Colin and I went over. I felt fear, but mostly I felt responsible, so we spoke to Vernon.

“How good of an idea do you figure that is?” I asked.

“Don’t fucking bother me Honky!” he yelled angrily. He swayed as he tried to find another target to shoot at.

I realized that this was not going to be friendly, so I sat down and listened to the next shot and the next. I was scared, but I was also numb. Each missed the target by a good barn door. The wind blew warm, and time seemed to be slowing down.” I got put in jail for one of these,” Vernon recounted, “tried to kill a honky, but they caught me. Two years for attempted manslaughter,” His voice seemed to come from behind his clenched teeth. The boat with the fishermen came round the point as Vernon continued, “Something about these guns . . . Got a lot of power; gives you power.”

He seemed to miss everything he was aiming at.

I looked around as the girls were taking the children inside the kitchen house. Their faces watching, grim and worried as Vernon shot again. The whole time he was talking, he would turn, then walk slowly pointing the barrel down for emphasis. Rick
scrambled up the path, yelling, “I thought that nobody was supposed to use the gun
around the camp!” Vernon fired again; not at Rick, but close enough.

“I’m gonna do what I want Rick, I don’t need you to fuckin’ yell at me.”

Shockered by the sound of the gun, Rick slowed. There were the three maybe of us
sitting watching Vernon, seeing him turn, talk, walk, turn, talk, fire.

“Mustn’t become a social worker” I thought.

So I gave back what he said, like I’d learned in those high school retreats. “Active
listening” they called it. When he talked of the jail, I just repeated it, gave it back to him;
just as he said. Colin gave his own particular brand of cool: not speaking. Rick stared,
frustrated and defiant, seeming not disturbed, except for the slight hesitation in his voice.

Then the instant came down on me, solid, like a touch. “It could be now,” I
thought, “this could be it. It could all end here.” Vernon looked down at me as I sat on a
log. The hot sun beat down. The anger and hate that he’d learned in prison seemed to be
aimed my way.

The wind and the trees seemed to rattle, shake. A minute passed like a lifetime.

Then Vernon seemed to be tiring. He sat; every now and then he buoyed himself
up checking us; then he’d start to wane again. We got to talking of guitars. Songs he
liked.

I nervously promised him I’d teach him some chords later that night. He
responded, continued to droop quickly from his post-drunkenness. He mentioned
something about going to sleep and, after a couple of minutes, stumbled slowly towards
the loft above the kitchen house.
We waited, watched, saw each other burn for an instant, then breathed again. A half hour later Rick went up and took shells out of the gun as Vernon slept soundly in the loft.

After that, Vernon was my friend. We played the guitar and he joked what a bad shot he was that day. Things quieted down. We had some fun days at the camp where a kind of peace descended. Things became slower, punctuated by the odd exciting visit by a bear. People talked only when they needed to and there seemed to a natural equilibrium as we lived off the land and took care of the kids.

A week later, we were getting short on supplies as we were cut off from the road by the raging river. Bill couldn’t get to us with the supplies. Vernon, Rick and the rest decided we had to get a deer to feed the kids. All we had left to eat was 30 cases of canned corn. So, early the next morning I was woken up by Rick. “Get up honky,” he said, “we got a deer.” As we stumbled through the woods to the trail by the mountain, the morning light made things clearer.

There, lying on the side of the trail, was a large deer. It took the .303 shot right between the eyes.

“Wow, who shot that?”

“Vernon,” Rick said, “he’s pretty good with a rifle.”

Vernon looked at me and smiled.

Because I had gutted a fish or two in my life, they said it was my job to clean out the deer. We thought we should hang it off the building to let the blood drip out.

Then we cut large pieces off it and by noon had created a scene right out of Robin Hood. Huge slabs of meat were cooking on the open fire. The carcass was turning on a
spit. The kids, who were sick of canned corn, were getting excited as the venison was reaching perfection.

At that moment, Bill came around the corner with a boatload of corn flakes, fried chicken, candy, and pop. The kids and counsellors disappeared and I was left turning the deer on the spit.

After another week, I had to go down to Vancouver for my sister's wedding and it was there I heard the bad news. The camp boat had come loose and Rick had swum out to retrieve it. There are two or three places in BC with the old Chinook name Skookumchuck or ‘active water,’ and this was one of them. The current was swift that day and it pulled him under. The story was that Mike had swum out to save him, but had been pushed out of the whirlpool last minute by Rick.

We decided to close the camp after his death. We gathered together as a memorial to Rick. After we spent the day cleaning up camp, we got together in the big house.

I remember playing a weird, hilarious game of charades and wondered if that was right. Bill, who felt Rick's loss most keenly, said not to worry. He'd seen this kind of death before—a young man who could have been a leader, dead before his time.

Portage

I was playing blues in a one-lunged bar in St Jerome, north of Montreal. I was not making much money as I had made the fatal error of telling musicians that I would split the evening’s take with anyone who wanted to jam with me. The evening’s take was small, around forty dollars, and it seemed as if every harmonica player in the Laurentians heard of my policy and came to play for cash. After a night of making only seven dollars,
having split the night’s ration with five harmonica players and one drummer, I realized I
needed to start looking for supplemental employment.

One night in the bar, I was greeted by a Quebeccois fellow who joined the rest of
my newly found band for a drink. In the 20 minutes between sets, he made his pitch.

“You speak English, right?” This was nice of him considering how bad my
French was, but then he re-phrased his question.

“You can teach English can’t you?” he asked.

“I can speak English,” I told him.

“Then you can teach English,” he informed me.

While I still wasn’t sure if this assertion were true, he told me where he worked
and why he needed an English teacher. It was a drug rehabilitation centre called
“Portage,” a mansion with adjoining chalets on Lac Echo. What was intriguing about this
program was that it was run by ex-drug addicts and even more wonderful, the pay was 20
dollars an hour—just to teach English!

“But I’m not a trained teacher,” I told him.

He said not to worry about that; I could start the following Tuesday. I agreed, as I
had been living for art’s sake and not making much of a living. When I drove through the
Laurentian Mountains to Portage, I wondered what this place might be. I came to a gate
surrounded by a wooded area and could see the large house at the end of the driveway.

I entered the mansion and was greeted by Joanne, an effervescent young
Quebeccois who told me that a morning meeting was about to begin and that perhaps I’d
like to see how things operated before I began.
We walked into a large dining hall where there must have been 40 young men and women seated in a semi-circle facing a group of five superior looking people in chairs. I say ‘superior’ because those in the larger group looked bedraggled and forlorn. The people at the front looked less so. In the forlorn seats, some had large placards; others wore giant dunce caps. The placards had words like “Menteur” (liar), “Crossard” (crook), and “Puitan” (whore) written on them.

As the meeting began, one fellow pointed to another and yelled, “Debout!” (Stand up!) and one of the more bedraggled souls stood and was immediately yelled at for being a “Hosti menteur!” (bad liar) for some infraction the person had committed. This scathing assault went on for three minutes with enough time for the yeller to catch his breath and then launch another attack. The attackee stood there, penitent and quiet, sometimes grimacing under a verbal blow that hit home.

Then, the meeting would resume as if nothing had happened. They would discuss the lunch menu or rowing that afternoon.

Then, a leader from the front table would shout, “Tremblay, debout!” This time it was a girl who was ordered to stand and tell her story. She was young and pretty, but clearly used up, and she told her story in a somewhat cute, coquettish way. In the midst of her tale, another woman yelled at her that she was a “putain,” nothing better than a whore who would sell her mother if she had the chance. Young Tremblay would be cleaning out the bathrooms with a toothbrush that day for playing the part of the coquette.

This all felt weird to me and punitive to the extreme. But while these harrowing scenes were played out, I was never made to feel that I had walked into something private. The opposite was true; these dressing-downs were meant for public consumption
and the more public the better. I had heard of this type of experiment when I did my social work degree—an institution run by ex-drug addicts—so I was intrigued.

Joanne asked if I could handle what I had seen and I said I could. She said to come back the next day to begin my English lessons. The classes would be small, no more than 10 students, and I could teach whatever I wanted. Confused but excited by the eventual pay-cheque, I drove the lovely road home between Lac Echo and my little house in Shawbridge.

I happened to like English Literature, so I poured over my dusty old English Lit texts that night. I found short poems by Wordsworth, a sonnet or two by Shakespeare and the odd lyric by William Carlos Williams. Then I started to create a survey of English Literature course as it had been taught to me in high school. I started with Chaucer, then moved through Shakespeare, past Donne and Pope to the Romantics and ended finally with the Victorians.

I decided what poet/poems to teach and realized I would have to practice my Middle English for class the next day.

When I got to Portage the next morning I was immediately shuttled into the meeting; similar yelling, but different people were made to stand up. This would be the daily routine—all the teachers would attend the morning meeting before taking over their classes.

When I came to my first class I saw a small bunch of worn-out souls before me. They had all gone through detox or cold turkey for heroin (they had a separate house for those who were still experiencing that particular ring of hell). I looked at these 10 students and realized my survey of English Literature might not work. Still, I carried on
by giving my rendition of Chaucer’s Prologue in Middle English. They stared up at me with an odd mixture of wonder and confusion.

One problem was that there seemed to be carte blanche when it came to confrontations in class. I would be intoning, “When that Aprill with his Showers Soote,” when a young student politely would say, “Excuse me Mr. ‘Ill but I need to talk to Yves.” He would then start yelling at some distressed character in the corner, “Tetrault, Debout!!” and accuse poor Tetrault of not paying attention. This was done at the loudest possible volume. When he was done we would return to Chaucer’s Prologue. There were at least four or five of these incidents in my first lesson and I couldn’t help thinking that Chaucer had never been taught this way before.

After a few days of this, I asked Joanne if we could not have confrontations in class and she made a special arrangement for me.

Suddenly my classes got bigger. Not, I suppose because of my pronunciation of Middle English, but because it was the one place where students could avoid a dressing down. Yelling or no yelling, I realized I was not going to get the metaphysical poets across to the class, so we moved on to grammar. This is where the difference between teaching and speaking English became real. I could speak it, but could I explain it? The students started to realize this as they asked about some weird parts of English grammar I did not know.

“M. ‘Ill can you tell me which is correct, ‘If I were the President’ or is it, ‘If I was the President?’”

“Well Jean, we usually say, ‘I was going downtown’ so it would be, ‘If I was the president.’”
“But ‘ere M. ‘Ill, in my book, it says it should be, ‘If I were’ because it is conditional.”

My mind moving fast, I began to employ a technique I’ve used for the rest of my teaching career. It’s called, “Keep one lie ahead of them.”

“Ah, Jean Guy, that is ‘Smith’s Exception’ only to be used in the case of presidents. Its name comes from President Smith of the United States.”

He looked at me with an odd mixture of awe and distrust, gave a Gallic shrug, and kept reading. Five minutes later he found the same problem, in this case with the word astronaut. “If I were an astronaut . . .”

“Ah, Jean Guy, that’s Jones’ exception used only in the case of astronauts...”

And so on. I was beginning to realize that my teaching career would rapidly be coming to a close as I was running out of exceptions.

Luckily, and not surprisingly, Jean Guy didn’t attend many of my classes after that. Driving home in the afternoons through the snow covered hills I thought, ”It’s easy being an English teacher; you just make stuff up.”

It was interesting during this time to see how some of the directors of the program would fall from grace. As ex-drug addicts, the temptation would sometimes be too strong and some would get caught smoking a joint. Suddenly from their august position at the front of the meetings, they would later be found in a dishevelled state in the crowd of the dispossessed. Those who had been getting clean moved up to become directors.

Then the great news came that a famous Quebecois rock star, Claude Dubois, was being sent to Portage after being caught with heroin. Dubois began as most did in the centre by wearing the dunce caps and signs. He took the odd public scolding, but it
always seemed as if his treatment was a bit softer than the rest. It turned out that many of the directors had musical aspirations and over time Dubois helped them craft and record their songs. One or two of them got airplay on the local radio stations. As a musician and teacher, I was disgusted by this clear attempt to buy the directors through their musical ambitions. I was also upset that I wasn’t being offered a record deal.

Someone came up with the idea that Dubois, the directors and even I would put on a concert in the open air. I played two blues tunes, but clearly the spotlight was on Dubois and the directors. They shimmied and sang like true rock stars and, not surprisingly, Dubois got out of Portage early.

I guess the ecstasy of music-making went to the heads of the directors because in a month, three of the rock star directors were sitting with the rest of the druggies as they’d been caught imbibing in drugs like rock stars. “Debout!” the new directors yelled at them and there was just a hint of revenge in their eyes.

**Beatrice**

I had been striking out with women so I decided to re-enrol at UBC. The women I had been meeting in bars, it turned out, were not for me. It usually took until the next day for both of us to figure that out. On my own, I was waking up from my afternoon naps with an intense feeling that I was dying and dying alone. I was 32. I was walking down the street and looking up at every young woman hoping that she would be the one for me. She wasn’t.

I mentioned this to Paul who suggested I go to the place where I last found a woman that meant something to me. That was UBC I said. “Well, go there,” he said.
After three years in a somewhat stupid social work job (at one point I was asked to train security guards), I went fishing by myself to clear my head. It was a terrible little boat. It had no middle plank to sit in, so I could stretch out and dangle my line over the edge. The currents weren’t strong, so I could find bottom with my fishing line and lie back to think. What did I want to be? I looked up at the cloudy, grey sky and decided I’d try teaching. I had taught a few lessons on mock trials in high schools and enjoyed it. There, in the boat, I resolved to go back to university and start over again.

So I did. I decided to become an English teacher after my earlier experiences in Quebec. I needed to complete some qualifying courses before I could take teacher training. As my first degree was in social work, I had to take some English courses if I wanted to be an English teacher. UBC had always been a place where I had been lucky in love. There is nothing like being a young student and falling in love with someone different every day while reading great literature. But my time was running out. I was not as lucky as before.

So, I signed up for a number of poetry courses. There seemed to be lots of nice young women there that I thought I might spend the rest of my life with, but none returned my gaze. My last class was the third poetry course of the day and was taught by a local poetic legend, Warren Talman. He had a revered reputation in Vancouver poetry circles and had invited Ginsberg and Creeley up to UBC for poetic happenings in the 60s. But by 1986 he had fallen on hard times. He came in to class looking like he had just woken up. This was primarily due to the fact that the hair in the back of his head was squashed up in a wave. The class watched as he moved like an errant feather into his chair. Once he had settled his few scraps of paper on the table, he looked up at us,
focused somewhat and asked, “Is there anyone else in this class who does not know what they’re doing?”

Everyone froze, except a pretty, dark, 30 year old woman who put her hand up. She was my Beatrice. After nodding in her direction, Talman started by trying to make a point about Dante and Ezra Pound.

“Now Dante . . . had a worldview like this,” and he drew a wavy, smallish square in the air. “While Pound had a view like this . . .,” a larger wavier square. But then things seemed to get lost. Which square we were in at any given time was anyone’s guess.

Talman mentioned Dante’s Beatrice and how she inspired him to write. I kept looking at the dark lady across the room. Trying to bring some focus to the last part of the class, and perhaps some attention to myself, I asked, “Who was Pound’s Beatrice?” This seemed to throw the professor somewhat. There was a long pause and after saying we’d take that up next time, the class quickly ended.

The next class started two days later but the dark haired girl was late. The class filled up, but I kept a seat beside me available just in case. To my amazement she then came in and had no choice but to sit beside me. The good professor arrived looking as if he had been sleeping this time under a tree as he had bits of leaves in his wavy hairdo.

“Now . . . last class . . . we were talking about Pound . . . and someone asked me about Pound’s Beatrice. Who was that?”

“Oh, oh,” I thought, “now what?” I raised my hand.

“What’s your name?” Talman asked.

“Peter Hill,” I answered.
He turned and wrote my name in very large block letters on the board. Then he
turned back and somewhat hazily intoned, “PETER HILL . . . Ah yes, Hill, like Dante’s
hill that he went up to see the multi-foliate rose . . .”

I hated being the centre of attention. I like to be noticed, but on my own terms. In
this case, I felt far too exposed.

My Beatrice was looking at me from her chair. Talman seemed to run out of
connections to make with my name, so he moved on to a lovely poem by Robert Creeley
(1962) called “Kore.” He then said poetry could represent how you felt about someone
across the room that you liked. Or a falling leaf when someone has just died.

He told a story of growing up in Seattle and playing soccer as a boy and being
sweet on a girl named Genevieve. Then class was over.

I tried to talk to my dark haired classmate but she disappeared quickly. The next
class she didn’t come. “Oh no, I’ve struck out again,” I thought, “she dropped the class
just because of me.”

At the end of that class, Professor Talman said that we’d be moving out of the
Ponderosa classroom to a bigger room in the math building just up the hill. Then his
lesson went back to the first lecture on Pound and Dante; it seemed as if he was failing
before our eyes. I worried about the professor. Then I worried about my dark haired
Beatrice. How would she know where the next class was going to be held? I decided to
keep an eye out for her.

I got to the next class in the Math building early and spoke with another student in
the class. Seeing that my Beatrice was not arriving, I left my bags and knapsack with him.
and ran down to Ponderosa. As I arrived sprinting, my dark haired beauty was walking towards the class in a full black cape.

“Oh hello, ‘Peter Hill,’” she said, putting my name into apostrophes.

“Oh hi,” I said nervously, “how did you know my name?”

“From last class,” she said.

“Right of course . . . crazy old professor . . . I don’t know why he said that.”

I didn’t want to make it seem that I was so desperate to be running to tell her that the class had moved, so we walked together to the Ponderosa classroom. We sat down in the empty room and chatted for five minutes.

Then, feigning remembrance, I said,” Oh, I forgot! The class has been moved . . . to . . . umm . . . room 315 in the Math building. I think.” She seemed surprised by this and we both thought we should head off fast to try to get to class on time.

When we got to the Math building we found that the class hadn’t started yet. My friend with my knapsack waved me over, but I looked at him as if he were nuts and sat near the front with Beatrice.

A few minutes later another professor came in and said that Professor Talman had been taken to the hospital the night before and would not be continuing the class. As a result, that day’s class was cancelled.

Saddened by the loss of our professor (Talman never did return to teaching), Beatrice and I walked out into the January air. We started to chat and found that we both were interested in becoming teachers. I asked what her name was since she seemed to know mine. I heard ‘Pamela’ but I didn’t hear the second part. I walked her to her next class.
Then I had to run back to the class where my knapsack was and crawl over what seemed to be 300 math students in the midst of an equation. I too had an equation running around my head as I left the building. What would this become? I sat in the coffee shop wondering about all this and found the Creeley poem Talman had given us.

**Kore**

As I was walking  
I came upon  
chance walking  
the same road upon

As I sat down  
by chance to move  
later  
if and as I might,

Light the wood was,  
light and green,  
and what I saw before  
I had not seen.

It was a lady  
accompanied  
by goat men  
leading her.

Her hair held earth  
Her eyes were dark,  
a double flute  
made her move
“Oh love
where are you
leading
me now?”
(Creeley, 1962)

Where did love lead me? The class took place in the spring of 1986. I married my Beatrice in the summer of 1987. At our non-denominational wedding we used the lines, “And so we dare to hope,” from Wordsworth’s "Tintern Abbey." I’m still married to my Beatrice—27 years later. We are still daring, still hoping.

**Crusty Mentor One**

Ray was three years away from retirement when I started my first job. He was old and grumpy, but with flashes of an earlier fire that still burned in him. He found that we both lived in Steveston and he offered to drive me if I ever needed a lift.

My wife and I were both new parents and living hand to mouth in a housing coop. We had one car that I used for the long drive into Vancouver. One day when the car needed fixing, I took Ray up on his offer.

He came to the door and saw my young wife with a child in her arms standing there to send me off. He poured on the charm with my wife and they chatted while I got my lunch. After we pulled away he asked, “Does she have a car during the day?” ‘No,” I responded,” she walks into town with the baby.”

Ray gave me a look that seemed to say I wasn’t up to much as we headed off to the early morning staff meeting. Being new to staff meetings, I began to pepper Ray with
questions about the agenda and the possible discussion items. He turned to me with a jaundiced eye which said, “I offered to drive you, I didn’t offer to get excited about staff meetings.” He was late in his career and you could see how teaching was taking it out of him. I clammed up for a few miles but couldn’t help myself. I just had to ask about accreditation.

It was a meeting late in September and the staff was restless. Teachers seemed to be complaining about everything and nothing seemed to be getting resolved. At one point two teachers started going after each other on a small technicality on how a meeting should be run.

Ray stood up and said, “Look, we’re all getting a little testy here. Let’s admit it. Nobody wants to be here. We’ve had a great summer, but now it’s over and it’s tough being back at work, but we just have to accept that. So let's get on with the meeting and let's get on with the year. It will end quicker that way and next thing you know it will be summer again.” At that point, a calm came over the room. It was true. No one wanted to be back at work. And he was able to quell that tension in a second.

Later that day on the way home Ray said that he had to “drop some stuff off in Steveston” two mornings a week and offered to give me a lift into work those days. I offered to pick him up in return the other days, but he said no, he didn’t want to get too close and besides he liked his own car better. I told this to my wife and said I wasn’t comfortable accepting his offer.

She looked at me saying, ”Don’t you get it? He’s doing this so I can have the car those days.” Which of course was true. This changed my wife’s world as she was able to see her family and get out of the little town.
So Ray drove me in. His only payment was to see my wife and child in the morning so he could turn on his special charm. But he was not a morning person. We didn’t speak much about lesson plans or politics on the way in. The afternoons were different though. He was like a little kid as we bounded down the stairs to get away from the school. He loved big band jazz music and, as the sun came out as we crossed the bridge into Richmond, Ray would turn up his massive sound system and we’d rock all the way home.

My greatest teaching envy has to do with Ray’s retirement send-off. Ray had been a band instructor before becoming the geography teacher, and there was word that both types of former students would be there. The retirement send-off was in the school auditorium and Ray drove me in for the evening's proceedings. It began with a few students making speeches and then Ray was called to the stage. It was clear that something was going on behind the stage curtain but we couldn’t tell what.

After Ray arrived on the stage one of the teachers handed him a conductor’s baton. At that moment, the curtain opened, and a jazz band of roughly thirty former students broke into a swinging version of a Duke Ellington song. Ray got it immediately as he started to conduct the students and you could see his boyish enthusiasm shine through. I’ve never seen a better send-off for a teacher and don’t think I ever will.

The other staff meetings I remember about Ray were the ones at the end of the year. As a staff, we are always asked to come in on the last day of school for a short meeting with the pretence that we’d be preparing for September. (The odd teacher would actually come into the school during the summer to work on lesson plans for the following year.)
Ray would arrive at school that last day pulling his small tin boat behind his fully packed car. He was leaving directly from the staff meeting and heading to his cabin on Vancouver Island. He would return from the cabin the day before school started in September. There was a message in all this, and it became clearer as the staff meeting slowly wound down. Ray’s smile got bigger as the minutes ticked away and the summer beckoned. Two minutes after the staff meeting ended, I heard the car and tin boat patch-out as he flew over the speed bumps in the direction of the open ocean.

Two Days

Shawn holds up six fingers.

“No way,” I say, “impossible.” I look into his eyes. It being Monday morning, his eyes still have that reddish tinge from the weekend’s festivities. But he’s telling the truth for once. Our colleague, Heather, has been wearing the same mauve Muumuu for close to a week. It seemed pretty strange for her to wear it for five days; perhaps her washing machine was broken or her husband left her. But a sixth day?? After the weekend?? Has she lost her mind completely?

“It’s true,” Shawn reports, “I saw her in the hall just now. She’s heading for the library. You can still catch her if you hurry.”

I run out of the staff room into the hall and spot her in a throng of students. There she is, 100 feet away, her mauve, floor-length Muumuu glowing with an unearthly light.

The students are taking notice as well. They never miss a trick. As a teacher, if you wear the same shoes two days in a row, they notice. To wear the same bright mauve outfit for six is bound to cause a near riot. I head back to the staffroom, my head shaking.
“Ok,” I say, “but you don’t win the bet.”

“Whaaaaat?” Shawn says aghast.

“No, listen, you bet she would wear it for five days, not six.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Shawn's red eyes blazing, “my guess was the closest.”

It’s true. No one else guessed more than five days. We started the bet on a lark after the third day. I picked four days and put down my loonie.

“Ok, you can keep the money, but are you sure no one said seven days?”

“She’s not gonna wear it seven days—the thing will start walking on its own if she does.”

At that moment, Heather enters the room. Normally this would lead to an embarrassed silence, but we’re quite good at changing the subject when the topic of conversation enters the room.

“Yeah, I don’t think the Canucks have a chance.”

“Well, there’s always Luongo,” Shawn says as he looks slyly at the pink form that plunks itself down at our table.

Heather is a small, bitter woman. She (sort of) teaches English, but mostly she teaches bile. She once complained to me that she was pissed off because her students had read Brave New World over the winter break as she had asked them to do. So why was she pissed off, I asked. Because she hadn’t read the book herself and was mad that they had. She planned on taking her anger out on the students that day in class. She would scare them by staying away from the novel entirely and teach another novel that she knew. The students would protest, but her next step would be to threaten them with a quiz on the book they hadn’t read.
How long does she wear that Muumuu? It goes on for a total of eight days. Sitting beside her, we notice no unpleasant smell. She may wash it every night for all we know. Perhaps, like us, it’s some bet she has going on in her own mind against herself.

Finally it's a student, god bless him, who asks if she's going to wear that dress for the rest of the year. The next day she comes in a black leather mini skirt. We prefer the Muumuu.

She has other odd behaviours. Every morning in the staff room as I try to wake up, Sally comes in with cottage cheese and ham. I don’t mind seeing these meals at lunch, but first thing in the morning is unsettling. It’s a particularly greasy ham mixed with a particularly runny cottage cheese. She mixes these together and waits for her bile to rise. I sit there trying not to watch, but am always drawn inexplicably towards this strange concoction. (I’m too unkind—deep, deep down she’s a fine person. In her last years of teaching she has softened somewhat.)

Why don’t I move? It’s because of a tradition held over from better days when one could meet one’s friends at the table and discuss the news of the day before encountering the children. But new people have insinuated themselves around the table and new traditions have begun. So here I am, day six of the mauve Muumuu, staring at her breakfast. I'm also her department head so I have to show interest as we discuss things English.

“I marked 60 essays last weekend,” she begins, obviously pissed off by something.
“Oh yeah?” I reply clumsily staring at the cottage cheese. I know something weird is coming. She continues, “Well, I didn’t actually mark them, I read them all, but didn’t give them a mark.”

Now this is clearly insane. Marking is the worst part of the job. To spend time looking at essays without giving them a mark is the highest form of futility.

“Why?” I try to sound calm.

“I just didn’t like them,” she says, “they weren’t good enough. I’m going to hand them all back and get them to rewrite the essays again.”

“Good idea,” I wonder if I can hide behind the bags under my eyes. I know I have to get out of there fast.

Feigning surprise, and an excuse, I jump up, “Oh, I just remembered, Principal Kevin wants to see me about some kid,” I say as I move towards the door. Any excuse to get the hell away before I strangle her on the spot. Having escaped and with nowhere else to go, I walk into the office just to make the lie seem true.

It’s 8:30 am in the office. Classes start in ten minutes. It's complete chaos—teachers are arriving late; harried subs with no idea what hell they are descending into, rifle through teachers’ cubby holes looking for instructions; students hand in forged notes supposedly from their parents; secretaries hand out keys and pick up phones; and two administrators stand around doing nothing. Oh, they try to look busy, but moving from one side of the room to another doesn’t always do the trick.

Only two of the three are in the main office. Dave, the vice principal, is in his office like a spider in its nest. I know I have to see him at some point about class sizes so I decide to get it over with.
I’ve tried to be nice to Dave. He’s the kind of guy that figures out one common thing he shares with you and brings it up every time he sees you. This occurs with two or three teachers on every staff. One hears you’re part Irish, so he puts on a brogue every time he passes. Another hears you like music, so he tells you about the Yanni concert he saw on TV last night. With Dave it’s the cabin on the island. My family rents a shack on an island beside a pulp mill. Dave has some palatial monster home on Gabriola Island on the water.

When in a good mood, he asks me after the Thanksgiving weekend if I’ve, “closed up camp.” Thinking we have a relationship that I can exploit, I answer something about busted pipes and mice. But when I left school half an hour early one day to go to the cabin, it was Dave who caught me. He remembers things like this and brings up the cabin to remind me of my indiscretions.

The last time I walked into his office expecting to talk about ferry rates, he hit me with six class sizes maxed to the limit—30 kids in each. The school board told administrators to lower the boom on teachers by upping class sizes. The bigger the classes, the fewer teachers they have to hire. Most administrators hate telling department heads that this is what next September will look like. But Dave doesn’t mind. He loves to watch teachers squirm. That is his game, nice one minute, an SOB the next. And, he always gives his shit-eating grin once he's given you the news. He likes to get under you skin and watch you squirm.

“Ok, this time I’m ready,” I say to myself as I move towards his office.

“Ah, Peter, I was just going to see if you'd arrived yet. Hey, did you close up Thanksgiving or Remembrance Day last year? “ He gives me the grin.
“Thanksgiving.” I answer in a surly tone. He knows I’m not going to be his cabin boy this time.

Dave has the most perfect hair you have ever seen. It’s as if he used a razor on it every night. He keeps it in a style considered hip back in ’79. He also has a very clean desk. That’s because he does dick-all for the entire day.

He is so mean no one will ask him for help, so his desk is always clean. He is like your best friend’s asshole older brother. On his wall he has one piece of art-a poster of a giant screw boring into wood. What this symbolizes I can only guess.

“I wanted to talk to you about class sizes; have you got a minute?” I ask.

“Sure, but I should let you know all of the classes in the English department will be maxed at 35.” He looks at me with his steely eyes, daring me to fight. I feel as if I’m falling through an elevator shaft. Then he grins.

One reason for my angst is that Principal Kevin, only six feet away through the adjoining wall, has said that he wants to reduce English classes to 25. One side of the wall says 25, the other 35. This doesn’t seem like much, but add all those extra kids from seven classes together and you get a whole new class. I feel like I’m Alice In Wonderland on very bad mushrooms as I move from room to room. Is this designed to make me crazy?

“But Kevin said we were trying to reduce class sizes, especially in English.”

Dave smirks nastily, “Well, we’ve had a new directive from downtown and we have to take everything to the limit. We need "flexibility."( He almost drools as he intones the new weasel word). "Hey, don’t you have to teach a class now?" he says as the bell rings.
“I’ll try to explain this to the department at the meeting today at lunch. I don’t think they’re gonna like it,” I say as I back out quickly.

I race up the stairs to my room,” Fuck downtown, Fuck flexibility. Fuck! Fuck!”

Those monsters at the school board were 3 million in the black last year and suddenly 17 million in debt this year. As a result, they are full of new directives. And now they’ve got their hatchet man Dave working on me.

On top of this I have an English meeting at lunch. Great, 14 snarly English teachers, and I have to tell them their classes will be upped to 35. One is Heather in her day-seven outfit. Another is a long-term sub whose name is—no kidding—Mr. Pew. He looks like Prince Peter Kropotkin with long waist-length hair and a beard. He wears a black shiny suit and looks like he is going to blow up the school. Instead, he kills everybody with his smell. He has the most powerful and offensive body odour I have ever encountered. Where do they find these guys? Oh Jesus, what a meeting it will be.

I walk in my room and there are my Grade Nines—my least favourite class that year. The Asian kids are sitting quietly on one side and the Caucasian kids are shoving and yelling at each other on the other.

“Ok, sit down,” I yell, “Let’s get started.”

Nines are worse than eights because they have lost all their innocence, yet still retain the energy of Grade 8s. I read the beginning of the novel to get them to calm down. This approach drugs them into submission and they either sleep or work quietly for the rest of class. The only nice thing about the Grade 9s is when the class ends. The next is better, one of my senior Literature classes. I look around the room after they file
in—a good class. Where are we? The great thing about Lit is that it’s like a train with stops—yesterday Wordsworth, today Coleridge.

Despite all the distractions of the morning, I do an okay job with Coleridge. His drug antics always wake up the students and "Kublai Khan" is a fun read.

At the end of Lit class, Dave appears. This is strange because in the three years he has been vice principal, I've only seen him on the third floor twice. Other teachers imagine he will get nosebleeds if he climbs the stairs to visit us.

“Hi Dave, what’s up? Have you decided to lower the class sizes?” I hope he’s already talked to Kevin. To my surprise he says, “No, I came about something else. I wanted to know if you wanted to sit on the accreditation committee with us. “

Now, accreditation is the greatest waste of time ever invented by a bureaucrat. It’s intended to be a report card for the school. We are asked every seven years to look deep inside our curricular souls and see if we have been teaching the children properly. We usually make up stupid answers and a team of principals from around the Lower Mainland to rubber stamp what we say. Nothing changes.

I’ve been dreading this question because I know Dave is heading the committee, which means he will take complete control and no one will be able to question him or his agenda. I decide to lie: "I’d love to Dave, but there is a crisis on the grad committee (which of course there isn’t) and I have to spend the next month figuring it all out.”

He then goes over to a map of an island on the wall. “Is this Anvil? Do you have to catch a ferry to get there?”

“No, we have a little boat.” Ah, yes, remembrances of sins past.

“Did you say your pipes froze this last winter or was it the winter before?”
Ok, I see, this is the good cop Dave, well this time it’s not going to work.

“It was last year. Look, I’d like to help you Dave, but I’m real busy. Sorry.”

“Just come to this meeting and see what you think.”

Now he knows that I’m going to be trouble at his stupid meeting, so why does he want me there? There has to be something big coming up so that he can mess me up. Perhaps he won’t give in on class size unless I help with the stupid committee.

‘Ok,’ I mutter, “I’ll come to one meeting. When is it?”

“Right after school. It won’t be long.”

I sigh. ‘Ok, well, I’ll have to leave fast because I’ve got a union meeting. So, if I come to your meeting does it mean we get lower class sizes?’ I ask hopefully as he leaves.

“No way, are you crazy?” He laughs a nasty laugh and leaves.

Lunch in the Staffroom

I run down fast for lunch, because I have the English Department meeting in the second half of the hour. Mostly it's the old boys that sit around one table at lunch. They are all great teachers who stayed with the noble art of teaching without selling out to administration jobs.

“You got sucked into that committee with Dave?” Bower cackles. The glee spreads across his face as he realizes that I’ve been sent to hell. He stretches his pudgy finger across the table pointing at me and laughs at my unforced error. The others join in.

“Why would you want to do that?” Rick asks.

“I thought I could use it as a bargaining chip for class size.”

They all crack up at this inadvertent joke.
“Dave wouldn’t give you the sweat off his ass if you asked nice,” Bower chortles having been through all this seven years before. “That little fucker is seriously twisted. Do you have to devise a mission statement?”

“No, we’ve moved onto the ministry questions, you know, about leadership, racism etc.” More laughter.

At that moment Ms. Wang comes into the staff room and comes to sit down at the table. She is in Bower's socials department and has come to ask him about maps. For moments like these, Bower has developed an amazing technique. In the course of a conversation he doesn’t want to participate in, he is able to actually move his head deeper into his open collar to the point where it looks like he’s going to disappear. We’ve dubbed this, “doing the turtle.” He has retreated so far into his collar during Wang’s map harangue, his neck has completely disappeared.

We chuckle and wink. Wang looks up and gives us the look. She is a religious zealot with no time for trash like us. She gets up to leave. I think she has gone out of the room, but she’s merely gone behind the coffee partition.

Thinking that I’m safe to return to boyspeak, I intone, “Did she want you to order some bibles for the Christian Club? Or does she want you to come over to her place and help with Sunday services?” I don’t notice the looks on my confrere’s faces. They seemed to be staring down or looking at me real hard or over my shoulder in a frightened way. Wang is behind me. Having heard my speech, she comes from behind the coffee partition to get a better listen. My friends immediately go into survival mode, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Bower says in an innocent voice.
“I heard what you said Peter,” Wang says as she storms out heading in the direction of the office.

“Why didn’t you tell me she was there?”

“We tried. Didn’t you see us? Always sit with your back to the wall.” They laugh again at my misfortune as I hurry off to my English meeting.

Lunch Meeting

We usually have our department meetings in a small room that’s too tight for 14 English teachers. This problem is compounded today by Pew, whose smell sends shivers down the spines of all who come within 10 yards of him. There is no way we want to be enclosed with him in a small room for 30 minutes. I decide to move the meeting into my classroom, which has windows that open.

The teachers file in with the wind howling through the windows. They look at the windows and they look at me, they see Pew and then realize why. I nod and hand out agendas. Heather comes in and sits by him. They deserve each other. A few others shuffle in, leaving many chairs between themselves and Pew.

I begin with a few light items then hit them with the hard stuff. “Now the good news. Dave wants all the classes up to 35.”

“Whaaaaat??!!” They look at each other aghast.

“You’ve got to be joking!”

“That asshole,” and on and on. All the while, the wind is blowing papers and hairdos around the room.

“Why don’t you do something about it? You’re the department head. The class sizes aren’t going up in the Sciences.”
“That’s because they have only so many tables to do experiments,” I lamely reply.

“Right, and they only use the tick method to mark their work. What about having to mark all the extra papers these extra students will produce for us?” The meeting is getting out of hand as if the increased class sizes are my doing.

Now, teachers can talk on any point ad nauseam and English teachers are the worst of the breed. They let the information course through their angry, caffeine-addled heads until the illogic starts to become clear. Then they start talking.

Seeing that lunch is about to end, I decide to cut the discussion short. “Well, I’ll talk to principal Kevin. He said he wanted smaller classes, so let him straighten Dave out. I'll let you know what he says.”

The bell rings so I’m saved from any more anger being directed at me. Like sheep, the teachers hasten out the door, not wanting to be late for their afternoon classes. Most other professions can decide when they want to take a break. If they’re tired, they can take it easy and get some coffee. Or they can pretend to be writing a letter, or put their heads down on their desks for a nap. But teachers are like little mechanized actors—a new show and a new audience four or five times a day—no matter how bad the performance. The bell moves us towards our positions on stage. The good thing about this is that lunch meetings are time-limited.

My last class of the day is another crop of Grade 9s. They’re loud, so I have to get louder, and I step over the line.

After all the running, deception, and manipulation of the day, I tell the class to “Shut up!” They see I’m out of sorts, so they take out their books and read quietly. It's
not one of my best classes. At the end of the day, I look down at my lesson planner for the next day and decide I have no energy to plan anything.

**After-School Accreditation Meeting**

I look around the table—such a strange assortment of people. The florescent light shows up the bad hair, bad shirts and ties, bad breath, and the bad moods of the teachers at this accreditation meeting. By the end of most days, teachers look ragged and have used up their best energy. Only the weirdest teachers serve on accreditation. The kind who believe everything the administration and provincial government tell them. When I arrive, I find that in a previous meeting they have already devised a mission statement that means exactly nothing: “We as a school, will provide students with a caring, challenging environment that stresses the whole learner in a holistic fashion, based on principles of democracy, inclusion and flexibility . . .” Oh god, I can’t even go on. Luckily I wasn’t there for that exercise in futility. We should have one mission statement: “We teach kids stuff.”

Now, the accreditation team wants us to address 30 questions that are supposed to bring us into a deeper analysis of how the school works. Questions like, “How do the admin, the teachers, and the students develop and sustain leadership in the working environment?” Aside from being impossible to answer, who could get teachers to even begin looking at that?

This is why Dave has put me on this committee, to drive me insane. It’s the equivalent to being at the dentist for two hours. Heather is also there, her hair looking particularly shaggy, her dress still mauve but with an unearthly glow. Heather begins by talking about how bad her last class was.
Wang comes in late and gives me the evil eye. Then Dave calls the meeting to order and the other drones start talking accreditation and the importance of the questions.

I can’t help it. I feel this black rage mass up inside me. It’s a genetic holdover from my Scottish ancestors. They must have felt the same kind of rage when the English came and pulled down their mud shacks. My heart beats faster. People try to discuss how leadership can occur simultaneously between the admin, the staff, and the students. I must shout out. My mind says don’t speak, but I do.

“How can anyone say anything about this question? How can we ask how the admin, the teachers and the students sustain leadership in one answer? Who dreams this shit up?”

Oops. The drones look over at me. It’s “Mr. Shit Disturber” again they seem to say. He is always rocking the boat. I can’t help it. My bullshit meter is walking off the scale.

“Can’t we look at the next question and then come back,” I suggest hoping to get somewhere, anywhere else. But I speak too soon. The next question is worse. “How does the school address the question of human rights?” I look at Wang. She jumps on it. “I don’t think human rights are protected at all,” she says, “My religious beliefs are being attacked daily.”

She looks at me. “Why just today, Peter made an inappropriate remark in the staffroom about Christianity.”

The table looks at me with their gimlet eyes. Dave looks concerned. They wait for me.
“Yes, well, I’m sorry, I don’t know what I was thinking. I do apologize. But one slip about religion doesn't really address human rights in the school.”

“That may be true for you, but for those of us under attack every day, it feels like it should be a top priority.” Thinking about Christians being under constant attack seems a bit over the top, but I bite my tongue.

But she won’t stop there.

“And the gay/straight alliance is turning children away from their proper religious beliefs. I've already begun a human rights complaint against another teacher as well.”

Dave realizes his meeting has gone off the rails, but he also knows the magic words 'human rights' has been spoken so he can’t address the topic without more protection.

“Yes . . . well. It’s getting along in the afternoon and some of you have other meetings to attend. I think what Ms. Wang has brought up is very important and she should raise the topic again when we have more time.”

At this, we all bolt for the door. I have to get to what’s left of the union meeting.

Union Meeting

By the time I get across town to the union meeting, they have already broken out the booze. The meetings are five hours long and are made less tedious by serving beer in the second half. This tends to make certain speakers less inhibited, which in the case of teachers is dangerous. Worse than even English teachers are the librarians and special needs teachers.

One goes on about how counsellors are being attacked and how librarians are so overworked. The other has to mention every form of designation for every form of
malady that could befall every kid in the district. I chew on a soggy sandwich and listen to these teachers go on and on as the beer starts to have some impact.

“Why doesn’t anyone ever talk about what’s happening to the average classroom teacher? Why do we spend hours on every exception, and not the thousands of other teachers and students?” I silently ask myself.

Surprisingly, another member says just this during the counsellor’s presentation.

“I’m not finished yet,” she brays as she drunkenly throws her papers at the questioner.

The chair finally realizes something is amiss and says, “Well it’s 8 o’clock. I’m sure we all have busy days tomorrow. So let's pack it up here.” I leave quickly and head home. My mind is aching as I stumble in the door. I say hello to my wife.

“Well, did any of that make you happier?” she asks. And she's right, not much of it did. We watch TV for a while; we've stopped asking how our days went. I stumble upstairs to go to sleep around 9:30.

I wake up at 2:33 a.m.

When I have bad days at work, I tend to wake up at the same time. I can keep my eyes closed and toss and turn in bed, but when I finally look at the clock it always reads the same number—2:33. I lie in bed trying to process what happened during the day. But soon I realize that I'm not going back to sleep, so I head downstairs.

I have a banana and boil some water for NeoCitran. It tastes horrible, but I know it will knock me out. I crawl back to bed and start sleeping around 3.
Next Day

I have the horrible feeling that I didn't set the alarm and I've slept in. It’s true, it's past 7. I drag myself out of bed, still woozy from the NeoCitran.

I shower, down some coffee, and jump in the car. I wake up somewhere between home and work.

No time to chit-chat in the staffroom today, so I sign in at the office and head for my room. There, at the door to my room, just as the bell rings, is Dave giving me that evil smile.

“Cutting it a bit close aren't you?”

“Yeah, well . . . I had some car troubles . . .”

“Well, we should go to the back room and talk about a few things.”

Now I'm in for it. I tell the class to take out their books and that I'll be right with them.

I have a little prep room off my main classroom and we meet back there.

Dave starts, “First of all, you have to thank me for getting you out of trouble with Wang. She wanted to take you downtown with her complaint but I told her I would deal with you myself. So, hold out your hand.”

“What?”

“I said hold out your hand . . .”

I do and he gives me a slight slap on my wrist.

“There, now I've properly admonished you for your anti-religious remarks.”

“Thanks, I guess.”
“Now, you owe me. That means you'll be part of this accreditation committee until it's over. You understand? And no more complaining about mission statements. Got it?”

“Yeah, okay, got it.” I give in. I still feel weak from the NeoCitran and haven't got the energy to fight anymore. Dave smiles and starts to leave.

“Oh, and by the way, Kevin told me to reduce your English classes to 30.” This too is a shock and doesn't quite sink in.

“It's okay, Peter. That's good news too. You can thank me later. Once you wake up.” He smiles like he’s just beat me at chess. He turns and leaves.

I stumble back into my classroom and realize it's my day two English Lit class and we're covering my favourite poet, Wordsworth. “How am I going to pull this off?” I wonder. But teachers are like actors and the show must go on. In this case the material is good, so I let it take over and we discuss Wordsworth's life and the Lucy poems.

Halfway through the class we get to the main event, “Tintern Abbey.” This is a tricky poem because it's long. But it is the most beautiful poem in the book, so I have to do it justice.

I start to read it. It says something about the material when you can read the same poem every year and not be bored by it. Every year this poem is a gauge of how I'm doing. And this year I’m not doing that well.

Earlier in the year, a good friend of mine died. Jim was young when he died—only 43—and he struggled with alcoholism for 10 years. His liver finally gave out and he suffered a major haemorrhage.
The connection to “Tintern Abbey” is that Jim and I finally got turned on to school when we were in Lit 12 class. We used to argue whether Byron or Shelley was the better poet, but we were in agreement on Wordsworth and “Tintern Abbey.” So, here I am 20 years later in front of my Lit class. I’m almost finished reading the poem when I get to the lines:

For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of thy wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I once was . . . ”

(Wordsworth, 1798, p. 158,114-120)

And then it all comes sweeping in on me—the loss of my friend, the fact that he'll never return, the visit with Dave, the sleepless nights, the NeoCitran, the oversized classes, the problem with Pew, the union meeting . . . and I start to cry.

“You'll be okay,” I say to myself as I look out at the students through tears. They notice something's gone wrong. I soldier on and finish the poem and then excuse myself and stumble into the back room. I try to get a hold of myself but can't. Finally, a student comes to the door and asks if I'm okay.

This kindness jolts me back into some semblance of responsibility and I try to pull myself together.
I come back to the classroom and explain some of what I am feeling about my friend. The students are nice about it, but I realize I need some time on my own. I let the class out early and somehow get through the end of the day.

When I get home I tell my wife what happened and she tells me to stay off the NeoCitran. I shuffle off to bed at 9:30.

I wake up in the middle of the night—at 2:33.

I think of how I cried in front of the students. I think of Jim and how the years have passed since those days when we first discovered Wordsworth together. Of how he came to his sorry end.

He had gone to Vancouver College like I had, but he wasn't the football type. He was inventive and fun but not a jock. He had older friends that were gay and I was afraid of them. In my fear, I'm sure I made fun of gay men, as everyone did in that school. Was Jim gay? I'll never know for sure. How could he admit to it in an environment so frightening and angry? I do know he hit the bottle hard as he got older and that is what killed him.

But maybe that wasn't the only thing that killed him. Maybe I played my part in that as well. The harmless jokes that tend to keep us in line, the silence, the fear; all these gave him the impression that he could never come out. And for that, I'll never see him again. After an hour of processing all this, I turn over and go to sleep.

In the middle of the night I have this dream:

I am in front of a very full class of 30 students.

It is early in the year and I’m trying to conduct a reading quiz.
They are a younger group—perhaps Grade 9 or 10. They are mostly boys. They have the energy of a group of Grade 9s and they clearly don’t want to listen to me. I tell them there will be a quiz and that they should take out a piece of paper to write down their answers. There is a wave of excitement as they look around to see who is going to test me first. They know each other. They know they have the reputation as a badass class.

I tell them to keep their eyes on their own papers, but one boy turns around to talk to another. I feel I must act. I go to that boy to make him an example and crumple up his paper. He is shocked and so are those around him. "I told you to keep your eyes on your own paper," I say in a loud voice.

He won’t back down, "But you can’t do that. I was just asking for an eraser."

“Yes I can," I say. Other boys start to join in the clamour and I tell them I’ll crumple their papers up too. The first boy continues to yell, and I tell him to get out of the classroom. He stands reluctantly and I tell him to sit outside until I have time to see him. By the time I turn around, the class is in an uproar.

I tell them the quiz will continue and that they should keep their eyes on their own papers. Another boy turns to talk to his friend and I go over and crumple up his paper. By now, various boys and some girls are starting to yell at me, “That’s not fair; you didn’t give us time.” I send the second boy outside.

As I open the door, I see the boy’s parents are there and speaking to their son. How did they get here so fast?

He is crying and saying he’s been sent out of the class for no reason. Another teacher comes by and asks what the problem is . . . What business is it of hers? She is
talking to the parents. I turn back to the class and start frantically grabbing papers and tearing them up.

I wake up, my heart beating fast. 5:35 a.m.

These dreams occur often. Some wake me up. They leave in the middle of the summer. Two weeks into July they go, and two weeks at the end of August they come back. What do these dreams portend?

Many good teachers have left the profession because of these dreams. Perhaps reality comes close to these events once or twice, but it is the constant dream that is debilitating. Finally, a half hour later, my heart beats slower and I get up to go to work.

That night is over, but even as it ends, the sleeplessness of a new day begins.

Poem Two: The Overhead Projector

Thinking back to Dad in the den
1966.
How he hovered over the overhead projector.

We kids were allowed to play with it
To make things big on the wall.
He planned presentations on it
The two years before he died.
At night after work,
He prepared his speeches
For the next day.
Then the stress spots appeared on his hands,
Then his heart gave out.
Was it working at home,
or a weak heart
Or was it the overhead projector that killed him?

Today, at a workshop,
December 2007,
The presenter goes through
Her overhead book,
Page after transparent page appears on the wall
And then is discarded to the ‘used’ side
Information/ words appear big, then are gone.
This same technology, so many years later,
So many technologies later.

Now, at the same age that my father died, I worry that
The overhead is stalking me.
I look up at the writing on the wall
I look down at the spots on my hands

I realize that my eyes
Are my own projectors
They project the words
from my dying heart.

Crusty Mentor Two

My other mentor was a drunk. Let’s call him Bill. Even crustier and grumpier
than Ray, Bill and I had the same spare together in my first year. If the night before
hadn’t been too rough, Bill could be quite funny in a sarcastic way, but you could tell
when it had been a long night. The cap he wore on his head would be pulled way down and he would mark essays in the far corner of the staffroom daring anyone to bother him. I found out that he hadn’t spoken to one fellow English teacher for ten years, but for some reason he decided to speak to me.

I was having trouble with one student and couldn’t figure out a way of getting him to behave. On one of Bill’s good days I mentioned this and said that I was thinking of going to the principal with my problem.

Bill gave me his first famous dictum: “Every time you go to the office it always gets worse.” This made no sense to me. Surely the administration was there to help out.

Disregarding Bill’s advice, and after a particularly unruly incident, I brought the student to the principal and explained my dilemma. The vice principal looked at the student and said, “Do you know what you are saying to Mr. Hill?”

Without getting the student’s reply, the principal extended his hand and raised his middle finger. The student and I both looked on as the vice principal flipped the bird to us both. I felt extremely uncomfortable, as this couldn’t have been in the administrator’s handbook. After an uneasy silence, he asked if the student understood. The student said yes and then we both left.

I couldn’t help but feel as if the finger was not only for the student but for me as well. Bill was in the staffroom, his red cap pulled down low on his head. Upon seeing me, he started cackling away to himself. Then he asked how it went.

“What did I tell you?” he said after I told my story. "It always gets worse!”

“But they’re there to help us aren’t they?” I asked in exasperation.
“Are they? Or are they only playing out some sick administrative game they learned on a weekend in Whistler with their buddies.”

He put his head down and went back to marking. I knew when he did this not to disturb him.

The next bit of advice Bill gave was about marking “nausea.”

“Get the essay of the best student in the class, mark her essay, then mark seven more, then take a break. If you don't, you will start to lose your marking powers by the ninth essay and you will start to feel marking nausea.” Again this was completely true. One can only concentrate for so long.

His next lesson on marking was even more important. “Get a quiet corner, scare off other teachers, especially P.E. teachers, and mark for an hour. “The point is that you begin marking and get some of it done during your spare. Don't ever mark at home. They don't pay you to mark at home.”

I know many teachers who do not mark during their spares because they get caught into a discussion with the PE teacher about last night's game. Then have to mark at home, get marking nausea, and then hate themselves and their students.

Bill also showed me about the marking force field. Thinking I had discovered my own teaching guru hidden inside a drunk’s outer shell, I approached Bill with another trivial problem while he was marking.

“What does it look like I’m doing here?” he glowered at me. “When did you join the P.E. department? I’m marking, so leave me alone.” I was hurt of course but I realized that Bill would not be doing a lot of marking once he got home at night and the bottle was open. (At least one hoped that was the case.)
I have since developed this same growl when a P.E. or Leadership teacher, counsellor, or librarian approaches me while I am marking. God bless them and the good work that they do, but they do not mark essays, or prepare classes for that matter, and they will never understand the concentration and privacy one needs to be able to do this.

My two crusty mentors helped a beginning teacher in ways that they will never know. For some reason they saw it as part of their job to take me under their wings ever so briefly and let me see how to survive in this business. Too often I've seen young, idealistic whiz kids that come into teaching and then leave after a year or two. They couldn't keep their ideals in the face of the crushing conservatism and negativity with which most schools operate.

These older mentors told me when to be cynical and how to protect what's important—the love of one's subject.

Bill is still teaching at the age of 69. He says he has too many alimony payments to stop. He gave up the bottle in his 66th year and the word is that his teaching is getting better than ever.

**Harassments**

Every teacher had to go to the sexual harassment workshop. In the wake of the scandal at the Prince of Wales' Quest program, the school board thought it important that every teacher knew that we were not supposed to take students on our private sailboats, give them back-rubs, or engage in group sex. The union had also signed onto this approach insisting that we all get informed. The question everyone asked was: How could the Quest teachers have carried on that kind of activity for 10 years in plain sight? The
program was right beside the school office. Did the other teachers, union leaders, administrators, and parents really not see what was going on? There was testimony of teachers wrestling with female students in that classroom to the point where a young woman's underwear was taken off. Teachers asked girls in the class to get their parents to do the teachers' laundry. The fact that young people were groomed year after year to be part of a sexual power trip was scandalous.

It was also becoming clear that Prince of Wales wasn’t the only school affected by this type of scandal. One line of defense that the offending teachers used was that no one told them that what they were doing was wrong. To counter this argument, all schools had to undergo training to prevent sexual harassment. Our school joined with the Byng teachers for the presentation.

One of the school board superintendents ran the meetings and a representative from the union executive assisted.

So we sat and listened to the presenters and then were told there would be a role-play in case we didn’t understand the lecture. “This should be interesting,” I thought.

The superintendent played the role of the school secretary and a first year teacher played the role the school custodian.

In the first scene the secretary asked the custodian if he could come over to her house to move an old fridge out of her basement. The custodian said yes he could.

The next scene was when the secretary asked the custodian if he could change the storm windows on her home as the weather was changing. The custodian said yes he could do that too.
“Hmmm,” I thought, “this is a very sophisticated form of sexual harassment. A secretary asks a custodian to change her storm windows. Who has the power?”

But by the last scene, I realized it wasn't sophisticated, just stupid. In the final scene, the custodian asked the secretary to a Canucks game.

“That’s sexual harassment!!!“ the superintendent cried out, shedding her secretary disguise.

We all sat stunned as the actors took their bows. We didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Then we put up our hands. One teacher said that as a woman, she felt capable of turning down a man that asked her for a date. However, she also wanted the option of being asked without the person asking being labeled a sexual harasser.

“Why can’t a person ask another person for a date?” I asked.

The union rep told me that I clearly didn’t understand the gravity of sexual harassment and that I should think twice before I asked another question. The reactions went on, but we were given the impression that it was our fault if we didn't get it.

We all filed out of the room feeling a bit confused. How could something as horrible as the events at Quest turn into something as muddled as this?

In an absurdly tragic way this story has a conclusion. Two years after the workshop, the union leader at the meeting was charged with sexually assaulting one of his students. He lost his teaching license and is awaiting trial on criminal charges.

Harassment Two

Harassment can appear in other ways. There was the time Margie ran up to tell me she was being investigated by the school board for infringing on another teacher’s religious rights. Margie was the sponsor of the gay/straight alliance in the school and I
was the union staff rep. I immediately phoned the School Board and asked the clerk who had contacted Margie what it all meant. The clerk told me that when another teacher makes a harassment complaint, the school board has no choice but to investigate. Thus began a three-year process of investigations and counter investigations. The teacher who made the claim was a devout Christian by the name of Alice Wong. Alice had insisted that she be able to attend the gay/straight alliance meetings to explain to the students the ‘protestant’ view of homosexuality. Margie, citing the safety of the students, said that Alice couldn’t do this. Alice then sent a number of emails to Margie insisting that she be allowed in. Finally, she charged Margie with abusing her religion. She claimed that she was being harassed by Margie. She felt that her religious rights were infringed upon. The Vancouver School Board received the complaint and the machinery went into gear.

The ironic thing about this was that the Vancouver School Board had just proclaimed a new initiative to encourage gay/straight alliances within its schools.

Still, as the VSB clerk told me, the minute that someone feels that his or her rights are infringed upon, an investigation must be conducted.

“Surely you take into account that some of these claims are frivolous,” I asked the clerk. “You could say I’m infringing on your rights now. Would you start an investigation against me?”

“No, because you are just making it up. We take claims of religious rights very seriously.”

“But isn’t it a School Board initiative to encourage gay/straight alliances?”

“Margie will have to meet with an adjudicator to determine if she infringed on Ms. Wong’s rights. That’s all I have to say at this time.”
And so began a long process of meetings with the adjudicator. Margie and Alice were called to meetings twice. As the union rep, I was called once.

Ms. Wong’s argument was that Margie was somehow persecuting her for her Christian beliefs. She also testified that the entire staff was ganging up on her because of her religion. I was asked to be a witness on Margie's behalf and answered that the gay/straight alliance had said nothing against Ms. Wong's religion. It was the mere existence of the club that bothered her. After 10 months, the School Board decided that no, Ms. Wong’s rights were not infringed upon.

The adjudicator ruled that Margie had gone through this emotional hell based on charges that had no merit. There were no facts to back up the complaint.

While Margie received no letter of condolence from the School Board for having started the complaint against her, the good news was that the case seemed to be closed.

That is, until a month later when Ms. Wong filed the same complaint against Margie with the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal. Ironically, the Vancouver School Board was also named as having infringed on Ms. Wong’s religious beliefs. The only positive aspect this time was that the School Board hired a lawyer to represent Margie. Again, there were a series of meetings with lawyers, administrators and teachers. Imagine the money spent on all this, never mind the psychological angst that Margie suffered. The absurdity of an attack against a teacher carrying out the wishes of the School Board was nothing short of tragic. After a year of deliberation, the Human Rights Tribunal came down with a complete repudiation of Ms. Wong’s point of view. In effect, the commission suggested that most of Wong's allegations were “speculative in nature” and that no attack on her religious beliefs had occurred. She had tied up countless hours of
professional time based on two phone calls that she made - one to the School Board, the other to the Human Rights Tribunal. Think of the legal meetings, the substitute teachers and the sleepless nights that were wasted because of one frivolous complaint based on a feeling. It’s no wonder that the V.S.B. is constantly in debt.

It is interesting to note that the Supreme Court of Canada has since used the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal's decision as a way of explaining how one charter right does not trump another. What I liked about the Human Rights Tribunal’s decision was that they returned to the good old-fashioned notion of legal facts. While Ms. Wong might have felt that she was being harassed, there were no verifiable facts to back that up. As a result, her claims were dismissed. While the names in this story have been changed, the above information is based on public record and can be found on the B.C. Human Rights Tribunal's website (B.C. Human Rights Tribunal, 2009).

Sexual harassment and human rights violations still exist in our schools and universities. But they can only be stopped when confronted by factual evidence. Trying to stop these cancers with "feelings" only creates other cancers.

Claire

There was a smell in the class one day . . . I hesitate to even tell this story.

We’ve all been there when a student passes gas. Whether it’s the innocent pong of a small kindergarten child or the surreptitious release of an embarrassed high school student. It’s innocent and then gone, an occupational hazard for a teacher.
But this was different. These ones could clear the room. If you somehow capture it as a visible cloud, it would be dark and brown and pervasive. I had a general sense of where it was coming from and it was human enough that it couldn’t be an industrial accident. And it was strong.

Then it was gone. It took a long time to dissipate.

But then the smells came back with more force and I started to realize that they were changing the way I taught the class. I’d be in mid-flight, holding forth on some poem or novel, and it would hit. I would stop and tell the class to write about their reactions to the poem and I would run from the room, abandoning my students like a captain leaving a sinking ship. Perhaps the student was only trying to get me to shut-up. Who knows? But it wasn’t just aimed at me. It happened to all her teachers. After a week or two of these bombs appearing in our classes we started to talk about it in the staff room.

“Who is that?” one asked.

"It’s Claire," they said. And it was. A brilliant student. The best writer in a school of great writers. We didn’t know what to say. How could we stop a thing like this?

“Kick her out!” the redneck teacher bellowed.

“Have you tried talking with her?” the liberal teacher said.

About what? How do you even begin that conversation? One teacher had been on a 12-hour bus trip with a class that included Claire. The trip took 14 hours because they had to stop so often to get out of the bus for fresh air.

The counsellors had spoken with her, to no effect. It had something to do with diet or anorexia and was very deep and psychological.
So it went on and got worse. I would only be half way through a poem when I would leave the room.

“But you haven't finished it,” my students yelled after me.

“It's called reader response,” I said as I ran. ”Respond to what you've read so far.”

I spoke of the situation with friends at a dinner party. It was the type of gallows humour that doctors and ambulance drivers engage in, making fun of something that is horrible. After describing the situation, a friend who is a social worker said, "We have kids who do that. It usually happens when they are abused in some way. It’s like a skunk reaction, you know? Get away from me. All social norms fall apart and that message is the most important.”

This worried me, but there was nothing I could do about it. It was too huge a problem for me to tackle. On the cold days of the year, students would open every window in the classroom. Some would beg to leave to go to the bathroom—anything to escape. I knew it was coming even before the smell hit me as I could see it in the eyes of the students looking frantically side to side.

And so, a psychologist was brought in to talk to Claire’s teachers individually.

“Treat her as if you would any disruptive student,” he said. “It has the same negative effect on the other students as a student yelling out of turn or throwing a chair. Tell her to leave the room.”

So I thought, “Ok. I’ll try that.”

The next day, after two bombs had fallen in one class, I asked the students to do some seat work and quietly asked Claire if she would step outside.
“Look, you know I respect you, and think you’re one of the best writers in the school.”

“Yes. And?” she looked up at me.

“But you need to take a walk.”

“A walk? Why?”

“You should go take a shower or something.”

I don’t know why I said this last bit. It made no sense.

She looked up at me hurt, but I wouldn’t allow myself to see it. I went back to my relieved class and felt slightly proud of myself for a job well done.

She came back to the class 10 minutes later and took her seat. She looked at me once and began writing. It seemed as if I had solved the problem.

Until the next day. Her parents called and they were livid. They said they were coming in the following day with their lawyer to meet with me and the psychologist and the principal. We were able to hold back the lawyer for a day, but when the rest of us met, I brought up what the psychologist said about her being like a disruptive child.

“I never said that,” said the psychologist.

Then the parents looked at me, the psychologist looked at me, and the principal looked at me.

“I’m in deep shit,” I thought.

The mother was able to hide her anger and suggested for now that we try to keep the lines of communication open. Meanwhile they would try to work on her diet at home.

I escaped from the office with a sense that I had dodged a bullet. But only for a day.
It was a particularly cold week in February and Claire was dropping more bombs in class than usual. The students were opening all the windows and the cold wind raced through the room. I opened the doors and Claire closed the windows.

“It’s too cold,” she said.

The students kept opening windows. It was becoming a nightmare.

My resolve hardened. I was becoming the redneck teacher as I thought of ways that I could get her kicked out of my class.

Claire’s mother had asked that we keep communication open, so I thought, “This is it. I’m going to tell her what's happening right now.”

I phoned. She didn’t sound thrilled to hear me at first, but I told her it had been a bad day for Claire.

What did I mean by ‘bad’ she asked. I told her about how the students had opened all the windows and how Claire had closed them. "Why did they do that?" she asked. “Because the smell was so bad,” I said proudly, pleased that we had come so quickly to the point.

Then it happened, I heard something I hadn’t heard before. She might have said, “Oh, my poor girl,” or “Oh, my poor daughter.” But it was the sound of the voice and the emotion behind it that stopped me. She was feeling the pain that her daughter felt. She felt her own pain as her mother. But mostly she knew there was something not right with her child.

I, of course, expected her to say ‘poor teacher,’ or ‘poor class,’ but we weren’t the first things on her mind. Her daughter was in trouble and suddenly it seemed to me as if
all the voices of all the mothers whose children were in trouble came through the phone line that day.

We spoke a bit more as she choked back tears. We said we would try to monitor the situation and signed off.

I never kicked Claire out of class after that. I’ve never been able to look at a student the same way since. They all belong to someone. They aren’t bad parts of a machine to be hurled away so that the teacher can do his or her thing. They are someone’s sons and daughters. And we all know how frail they can be.

**Another Breech in the Wall**

This is a story about going public. The first part of the story begins with a Maclean’s magazine article (2009) by Sandy Faraan titled, *Can High School Grades Be Trusted?*

If you need better marks, some private schools are happy to oblige—for a fee. One afternoon in the spring of 2007, teacher Peter Hill was recording marks when he confided to a colleague that one of his Grade 12 English students was in danger of failing. In fact, Hill explained, he’d been concerned about the grades of several of his English 12 students at University Hill Secondary School in Vancouver, and he thought it strange that none of them had come to him for extra help. “I was used to handing back essays to kids and if they weren’t doing well they’d come to me after school and they’d want to know how they could improve,” says Hill. “But in this case I handed back the essays and they’d just sort of grin at me, throw the essay away or whatever. And I was like, ‘God, that’s different.’ ” His colleague, a
guidance counsellor, told Hill not to worry: the student would likely get a good mark anyway because she was taking the same course after-hours at a nearby independent school.

Hill was stunned: “I just said, ‘What other school?’” It turned out that five of Hill’s students had been taking Grade 12 English at Century High, an independent school that catered largely to international students hoping to attend a prestigious university in Canada or the United States.

The students would regularly attend Hill’s class during the day, then take the same class at Century in the evening or on Saturday. “The weird thing is that kids were enrolled here [at University Hill] taking English with me and they were going to Century High, and if they decided they wanted the Century High mark, then it would go on their transcript and it would appear as if the mark came from this school,” says Hill. In British Columbia, that was made possible a few years ago when the province introduced a new policy allowing students to take courses from different institutions. The change was intended to provide choice for rural students, who could take online courses not offered in their home schools and then choose their “best mark” to appear on their transcript. But the policy has led to so-called credit shopping, too. It bothered Hill considerably that a student could be taking the same class at two schools at the same time, then use the higher marks on her application to university—so much so that he decided to do a bit of sleuthing. He found a B.C. government website that lists class marks and provincial exam results for every school—private and public—in the province. And he found some disturbing information: for the year 2006-2007, 101 Century High students (60 per
cent of the class) received a B grade or higher in Grade 12 English; just three failed. When he looked at how the same group of 138 students performed on standardized provincial exams, the results were just the opposite: 108 had failed the exam and only eight students got a B grade or higher. He found similar differences dating back to 2003-2004, when the online records begin.

And Century wasn’t the only independent school showing a large difference between marks awarded by teachers and provincial exam results. Hill decided to blow the whistle. He reported his findings to the local media, and a few days later then-minister of education Shirley Bond ordered an inspection of Century and any other school—public or private—that had big discrepancies between class marks and standardized exam results. In March 2007, the B.C. government issued warnings to five independent high schools in Vancouver—Century, Kingston, Royal Canadian College, Pattison and St. John’s International—insisting they move quickly to address concerns about large disparities between English 12 marks on provincial exams and the marks awarded students for class work.” (Faraan, 2009)

Faraan's article explains how I became a public hole-plugger in the great wall of English standards. I originally became an English teacher because I love poetry, I never knew that I would become a public scold. But there it is. I believe English instruction does need to be protected and feel that it is part of my job to point out flaws in the system. Two of those schools mentioned in the article were shut down. One was owned by Michel Lo, a fundraiser for the Liberal party. Strangely, Century High is still in business and still is getting vastly different school and government exam marks.

So, why bother making such as fuss about standards? Why go public?
Let’s see . . . over 27 years . . . an average of 170 students a year . . . four written compositions per term, per student . . . That’s 12 written compositions over a year, times 170 students . . . (time to get out the calculator) . . . that’s 2040 per year . . . times 27 years . . . that’s over 55 thousand compositions that I’ve marked!!!

No wonder I’ve lost my mind. I could fill a room with those marked papers. After all that work, I think it’s important that students not just “buy” their marks. I think their grades should be real.

Does marking papers make a difference? Each year I start out with a group of new students. Over the course of several months I get to know them. I find out who they are and how they write. By the second composition, especially if I give them a creative assignment, I begin to see behind the faces in front of me. There is the “I look new to the country, but I'm the best writer in this class” student. They tend to be silent at first, but their writing is so sophisticated, I know I can call on them to participate in class.

Then there is another kind of student, the ones who choose to be silent. A colleague and friend of mine, Ken, is fourth generation Canadian of Chinese heritage. He went to school in Vancouver, but didn't like his Grade 10 English teacher. So he remained silent in her class. When his mother came in for parent teacher night, the English teacher remarked how well the mother spoke English. Ken's mother asked why the teacher would say that. The teacher said that, for a family that had just arrived in the country, her use of English idioms was impressive. Ken's mother told the teacher that her grandfather was born in Vancouver. She then explained that her son wasn't ESL, he just didn’t want to speak to the teacher. His mother went home and yelled at Ken, telling him to speak up or he'd be moved to an ESL class.
There is a final group of students that must be considered. These are the ones with very poor English skills. At the start of this year, I had five students in English 12 whose English was so poor that they were failing the first term. They had taken English 11 in Summer School and that teacher had passed them. They arrived in my class with English skills that were borderline incomprehensible. By mid-October, all five of these students approached me to drop my course. I asked them why they were changing and they said they could get a better mark with an online course. In the old days, students used to hide this kind of motivation, but mark-shopping now is openly discussed. They told me they would be taking English with the Heritage Christian Online School run out of Kelowna. I told them that doing the course online would not help them. They needed to work hard in class to improve their English skills. I offered to help them after school, but they said no, they wanted to get better marks elsewhere. Of course, on their official transcript it would show that they got their marks from University Hill. This made my blood boil.

One student did come back to talk to me. Let's call her Lily. She told me that she had discussed the online course with her parents and they wanted her to take it so she could get into university. “But your English won't really improve, you know that don't you?” I said. Yes, she was aware of that, but she needed the higher grades. I could also see she was concerned about her choice. I expressed my disappointment, but wished her good luck.

Two days later, she came to me and said she had thought it over and that she would like to stay in my class. She also realized that this was jeopardizing her chance of going to university.
There are a few times in a teacher's life when things seismically shift; this was one of them. I have to admit, I had tears in my eyes as I promised that I would spend as much time as I could helping her to improve her English.

In the first term she received a 65%. She worked hard in the second term trying to make sense of English grammar. Her mark that term was 76%. The university said that if the trend continued she would be accepted. The trend did continue and she was accepted.

There is the public story in the Maclean’s article and there is the private story of a young woman who worked day and night to improve her English. Lily’s story doesn’t sell magazines, but it means much more to me. Of the other four that dropped my class, one did not finish the year. The others had very high school marks and very low exam marks. Both got into the universities of their choice.

**Poem Three: Publishing**

I notice there are many workshops now  
On how to get one’s work published  
And many writers gleefully speak  
Of how they send their poems to magazines  
And get rejected over and over

I want none of this.  
I want the publishers to beg me to give them my poems  
I mean BEG.  
On their knees bro!

Crawling up the front stairs of my home  
Like pilgrims crawl up the stairs of  
A saint’s shrine
I want them to negotiate
With the lawyer I don’t have
I want their people to speak to
My people that I don’t have

I want a non-job for
The job I currently have
I want them to ride in as champions and
Smite my enemies—
Bosses, evil workmates, bullies on boards and
Parasites on Planning Committees

I want to abuse them
As I was abused
I want them to put on a long black robe
And learn a dead language
I want them to ring bells on their knees
I want them to wash my hands
And give me little bits of bread and wine to eat

I’m going to kill their fathers at an early age
Make them live through abortions, job interviews and bus stops.
I’ll have them lie, cheat, evade, patronize, evaluate, masturbate, procrastinate and
Be yelled at by children, lovers and students

And when it’s all done, after all the begging is over,
I want them to take
My poems and shove them
So I’ll know where they are filed
So I can finally stop trying to find them
In this poor, dried-out, dusty old heart.
CHAPTER THREE: REFLECTIONS ON THE STORIES

The English poet Stevie Smith had this to say about the dangers of explaining why she wrote her poems:

People often ask poets how they write their poems and why; how the first ideas come into their heads and so on. They often ask me these questions, but they are not easy to answer, and there is a serious objection too. If you talk too much about your inspiration or other people’s you will quite often find that you are unable to write at all, to put one word in front of another. It is like digging up flowers to see how they’re getting on. We all know what happens to the flowers—they die. Well now, to come to my own poems and to try to say how and why they are written. They are written from the experiences of my own life, its pressures and fancies and they are written to give ease and relief to me. (Smith, 2009, audio recording)

After so eloquently expressing why she doesn't discuss inspiration, Smith goes on at length about how she was inspired to write her poem, “Not Waving but Drowning.” The poem came to her after reading in the newspaper about a man who was drowning while his friends thought he was waving.

I understand Smith’s caution against explaining inspiration. It’s sometimes easier to write a story than to talk about why one wrote a story. In the following reflections, I will attempt to discuss my stories without killing all the flowers.

As mentioned in the introduction, these reflections will discuss how and why these particular stories were told. There are hundreds of stories that I can recall as teacher and a student, but I’ve chosen these for particular reasons. First, I think it’s important to not only discuss being a teacher, but also being a student. The stories “The Priest and I”
and “Two Days” are the bookends for the rest of the stories. One is about being a student and the other about being a teacher. Both can be categorized as “stories that won't go away,” because they haven't. Their gestation began 10 years ago. It’s around these early attempts that the other stories were created.

To alter Wordsworth's dictum that the child is father to the man, I would suggest that the student is father to the teacher. That is, what happens to a student in school often creates the type of teacher one becomes. This being said, one would think that as a high school student surrounded by violence and abuse, the last thing I would want to be is a teacher. But my high school life wasn't as bad as the stories portray. There were some fine teachers with no hidden agendas. One taught me literature, the other taught me drama. Both are my great academic loves to this day. But it wasn’t these experiences that made me want to write. As W.H. Auden said about the poet W.B. Yeats, “Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.” (Auden, 1939, p. 2398). In a similar way, the more abusive events of my life “hurt” me into writing.

While organizing this section on reflections, I found it difficult to come up with one coherent framework with which to analyze the stories. I have found that my reactions to the stories peeled away like the skin of an onion as I tried to think of a way of responding to them. Because this autoethnography is called a "portrait of a teacher," I wanted to give some idea of how this portrait appeared to me after it was written. But my viewpoint often shifted. One day my analysis would be purely psychological and I would trace everything back to the death of my father. Other days, I relied more on educational theory.
At other times, my reaction was to write even more stories about the stories I had written. Some days the stories made me angry and I wanted to denounce those that hurt me. Other days I wanted to denounce myself for having the gall to even speak about these things.

So, instead of being at a loss for what to say, I became tormented by wanting to say so much. I’m beginning to understand why many artists do not want to talk about how their work was created. It's very hard to be honest about why one turned left instead of right in these paths in the woods that life presents to us. What made the young man in these stories choose these particular outcomes? Donnard Mackenzie (2011) discusses a similar problem while trying to analyse why he wrote a play,

I believe my hesitation may arise from the feeling that to investigate one’s practice in order to find unspoken meaning has the danger of becoming wholly self-reflexive. And while I was working I have to admit that I was concerned it might lead to watching my decisions, and that can lead to censoring the writing because of hyper-questioning. Once the work is complete, one hopes it speaks for itself: If not, one could become trapped like Beckett’s character in *Krapp’s Last Tape*. (Belliveau and Mackenzie, p.4)

One way I tried to avoid over-analyzing was to ask myself how the stories originally appeared in my mind’s eye. They seem to be based on photographic memories of key moments. Hughes and Eamer (2012) discussed Furman's notion that epiphanies in stories are like photographs:
Furman (2005) explains that when telling stories of events that have occurred in our lives, we base our narratives on a series of snapshot-like memories we have of that experience. We attempt to sequence and link the snapshots chronologically and fill in the gaps between them so as to create a coherent, fully developed narrative. (p. 59)

This is certainly true for my writing, as I can see the key moments of each epiphany in each story. It may be when Vernon is walking with the gun in "Glue," or it may be talking on the phone with Claire's mother. Each narrative coalesces around these key images. With that image as an anchor, I can then go back to the beginnings that lead up to the epiphany.

Keeping in mind the importance of a hook at the start of each story, I try to ensure there is something to draw in the reader. This might be a line about how I received my sexual education from the Catholic Church, or Shawn holding up six fingers to signify how many days the mauve muumuu had been worn. From this point it is only a question of trying to fill in the factual events leading up to the epiphany.

As mentioned in the introduction, it's also important to remember the “juicy stuff” as Saldana puts it. There must be a risky narrative that is interesting enough for the reader to keep reading. While writing a memoir, it's important to talk about the events honestly, but it's also important to keep the story moving. Kurt Vonnegut succinctly addresses the importance of narrative structure, "Somebody gets into trouble, then gets out of it again. People love that story; they never get tired of it."(Vonnegut, 1977, p. 6)

After 25 years of teaching Shakespeare, one gets used to the classic structure of his plays: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement. It's not that
my stories are crafted to fit this classic pattern, but rather that these stories have stayed
with me because they unfolded in a way that follows this pattern. We all know what it's
like when someone wakes up and wants to tell us his/her dreams. It's interesting at first,
but eventually the dream's non-linear quality loses us because we struggle to create a
narrative meaning out of it.

Think instead of a great storyteller. S/he knows that their story has a narrative
flourish, a twist, a turn, or a key scene; his/her confidence comes from knowing the
power of that well-constructed story. The key aesthetic question the storyteller has to ask
is, "Will my reader be engaged by what I have to tell?"

With my own stories, I tried to follow a pattern similar to Shakespeare's. I
introduce a character (in the case of this autoethnography, myself), a conflict, and then
follow the story to a high point of tension.

Looking at my stories in detail, I'd suggest the climax occurs in the following
ways:
In "Glory," the climax is when the rebel players leave the field;
In "Beatings," it's when the teacher hurls the student across the desks;
In "The Priest and I," it's when the priest jumps me;
In "Claire," it's during the phone call with the mother;
In "Two Days," it's when I break down in front of the class;
In "Beatrice," it's when I fake it in Ponderosa;
In "Glue," it's when Vernon is holding the gun over me.

The reason that these stories have importance for me is that they build to a climax
and, no matter how strange, there is an epiphany following each one. They also follow
the basic qualities of Shakespeare's pattern while still being connected to my memory of what occurred. I would also suggest I learned something in each situation, no matter how random the narratives appear.

I think another quality behind the creation of these stories concerns the breaking of taboos. There is a risk in talking about being abused by a priest, a student that smells, my own homophobia, a school board meeting on abuse, a teacher attacking another teacher for her sexuality, a First Nations fellow with a gun, a drunken union meeting. After events like these, there is a voice in my head that says, "Let it go; pretend it didn't happen; don't bring it up. There will be a cost for telling that story." There is a powerful motivation to keep things quiet. However, there is an equally strong a motivation to tell these stories. Because they gnaw away inside us if we don't.

Once the first step of telling the story is made, once the first words are written on the page, it seems as if the stories write themselves. The first step is the hardest. After that, all you have to do is dredge up the details permanently lodged in memory. Once that opening in the brambles is created, it seems as if the words come out in a white heat. Not stopping to edit, I often look up after two pages to find a garbled mess of words with red highlights showing spelling and grammatical errors. But the story in its infancy is on the page. From there, it's just a question of pruning.

**What kind of teacher?**

Looking back on these stories, I'm also interested in what kind of teacher I've become. Daniel Miller said that he wanted to "provoke and disturb" his sensibilities when he wrote his autoethnography. The following reflections describe how these stories have
provoked and disturbed me in a number of different ways. The presentation is impressionistic, reflecting how my mind has shifted as I've thought back over the words I've written. At times, the writing is more expository as I feel I have to explain more about what I feel and what I’ve since learned.

**Reflections on “Glory,” “Beatings,” and “the Priest and I”**

The stories about my time at Vancouver College, “Glory,” “Beatings,” and “The Priest and I,” have an “J'accuse” quality to them as I try to give an account of the brutality and abuse that occurred inside the walls of that school.

As mentioned in the introduction, I was inspired to write the first part of “The Priest and I” after watching *The Boys of St. Vincent* (1992). That tragic story in Newfoundland was the tip of the sexual abuse iceberg in the Catholic Church, and we now know the extent of the abuse that occurred worldwide. I consider myself lucky in my case that the abuse wasn't more extreme. However, it does stay with you. The sense of betrayal is the most debilitating.

A similar type of betrayal is true in “Glory.” In both stories there is a loss of innocence at the hands of adults that should have known better. It was an introduction to a world where the teachings of the Catholic Church were reversed. Catholics are well known for quantifying how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Sadly they are also known these days for the number of children they have abused.

In “Beatings,” I learned enough about a Christian school to realize that not much of what was taught was being followed. By Grade 11 I could see that I had to keep my head down and my mouth shut if I was to survive.
My life entering high school was in pursuit of glory. I only had to spend two years in the world of real football to realize my glory didn’t reside there.

So I was adrift. I tried out for the school musicals and was given small parts in Grade 11. And then I was asked by the priest to help out with retreats. This was a new, strange kind of glory, an angle few had discovered. It gave me a strange kind of mystery as if I had access to a world of secrets no one else knew. It also got me out of town and into nature. So I pursued glory in a different way. But that went sideways as I discovered the priest had a different agenda.

**Idealist and Coward**

Two words come to mind while reflecting on these stories—idealist and coward. I think English teachers are often idealists. I’ve asked university students over the years why they want to become English teachers. For the most part, it's because they have had bad experiences in high school English classes and they want to teach better than they were taught.

This is not true of the science teachers I know. Many want to improve science instruction, but they often say they had good science teachers and want to be like them.

English teachers are different. They often have a messianic idealism and are bent on changing the world. Then they are dragged down by the monolithic education system and become bitter. What I learned from my two mentors is to keep my head down and stay in for the long haul. They remind me of Benjamin the donkey in Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1946), “The oldest animal on the farm and the worst tempered. He seldom talked, and when he did, it was usually to make some cynical remark . . . His motto is, “Donkeys live a long time. None of you has ever seen a dead donkey.”* (p.19). My mentors shattered
my sentimental views and let me see that there was a way to continue teaching no matter what educational fad came along.

I’ve always had a sentimental view of the future and am often shocked by reality. Life was supposed to be that long catch and the soft landing on the grassy curb-side. Instead, it was the psycho coach who wanted to draw blood.

When my sentimental view doesn’t come true, I undermine the people in charge who have stood in the way of my dreams.

I take this on as a crusade and work to foment revolution among my fellows, whom I imagine are equally disenfranchised. I think if you asked any of my current colleagues to come up with adjectives that describe me, ‘shit disturber’ would be in the top three. I was like that in Grade 10: I’m still somewhat like that today. It’s not that I spend all day doing this. Most of my time is spent teaching and trying to be constructive. But, causing trouble between classes is one way of getting through the inanities of high school life.

**Coward**

Adults always tell children to stand up to the bullies. I wonder if these adults have recently stood up to a physically abusive bully? I tell students to run from bullies. I tell them to live to fight another day.

I was bullied by a guy in high school. I’d seen him fight people who had stood up to him. He cut their faces with his hands. I was far too vain to let that happen to me.

I was a coward back in Grade 10. I had a bully as a coach and did not stand up to him. I clearly remember watching the rebel players leave the field while I stood still. Why? I think in the end I was afraid of authority. I worried that I’d be kicked out of the
school. The players who walked off the field were tough guys who tended to get into trouble all the time. They knew how to question authority. In this case, they knew the adult was wrong and weren’t going to stand for it.

I try to be less of a coward today. I tend to speak up in meetings. I still stir the pot behind the scenes, but I feel freer to speak my mind in public.

This is one of the great things about belonging to a union. I feel protected to speak when my “bullshit detector” goes off. I’m emboldened by writers such as Irving Layton who often spoke his truth out loud. After Layton read that Pablo Neruda was once an apologist for Stalin, he wrote a poem (2004) entitled, “Where was your bullshit detector Pablo?” I think my own detector has a rather delicate trigger, but I still think this is better than no detector at all.

It is a long journey away from that boy who stood paralyzed on the football field, to an older man writing this dissertation. I’ve always wanted to make these stories public, but always waited.

To want to be a writer and to be a writer are two very different states of being. Margaret Atwood tells the story of how, at a cocktail party, a brain surgeon told her how he wanted to be a writer when he retired. Atwood replied that she wanted to be a brain surgeon when she retired. The brain surgeon laughed, replying that one needs years of training to be a brain surgeon. She replied that the same was true of writing.

It is not enough then to want to be a writer, but one must try to step out of that fear and write. Cowardice can appear in many forms and one never wants to look back at life saying, “I coulda been a contender! I coulda been somebody!” like Marlon Brando in
the movie *On the Waterfront* (1954). In Brando’s case it was the mafia that was holding him back. In my case it is my own fear.

As I mentioned before, the only way it seemed that I could survive in high school was to keep my head down and this meant that I had to achieve glory in an entirely different way. I discovered another form of glory-seeking through the use of a technique I call “slow-pitch.”

**Slow Pitch**

“I just can’t imagine you playing football,” my wife said after she read the first story. Thinking that this was another attack on my masculinity, I protested far too much about all the sports I played in my youth—football, baseball, basketball, and soccer.

However, I did admit I enjoyed these sports more when they were pick-up games rather than uniformed and coached. The official teams I played on tended towards the hostility described in “Glory.” Not all of these teams were as sadistic, but they leaned that way. As an adult, I enjoyed playing in the Kosmic baseball league, also known as a "slow-pitch," beer league in Vancouver. This fit my idea of sports—playful, sometimes glorious, but never sadistic.

“But that’s how you are with music,” my wife continued, “you don’t like organized performances, you’d rather just play with friends for the fun of it.” It was at this point I realized she was on to something.

I had done my time playing professionally night after night in smoky bars in BC, Quebec, and even Japan. The sad thing about this lifestyle is it tends to kill one’s love of music. As a performer, I had a set list of songs with the hope that the choice and order of the songs would interest the audience. As a result, the same songs tended to be played
over and over again. There was some room for improvisation, but after a while it became a grind.

These days, my wife and I get together at a friend’s house and play jazz standards. Again, beer is involved and there is a sense of play while we go through our songbooks. The jazz songs are complex enough that we never get tired of them and oftentimes we find that we can get quite emotional singing them.

Even a tune as familiar as Mancini's “Charade” (1963) becomes poignant, “Sad little serenade/Song of my heart's composing/I see it still/I always will/ Best on the bill/ Charade.” We play the songs slowly with feeling. This type of playing is also called “slow pitch.” We have put on the odd performance where we play these tunes, but I tend to have the same worries about audience and set lists I had in the past. In a bar, sometimes people listen, sometimes they don’t. But in a slow pitch world, these worries never appear. There is no audience, there is no set list; songs appear out of the blue and their appearance is all the more welcome because of this.

I also play songs for my students. When I teach the English ballad, I find it more effective to play the song live for the students. In creative writing class I teach a song writing unit where I play some of my own compositions. Then the students compose their own songs to wonderful effect. This is different from the set lists and worries about the audience. We perform our songs for each other and everyone listens.

I also use the slow pitch approach with acting. I “trod the boards” in my 20s, but always hated having to hustle for jobs. In those days, an actor had to appear in bad TV ads to stay alive. If I did land a part in a play, there was always the question of
audience—as in, would there be one? This isn’t true as a teacher. I can choose whether I want to play Hamlet, or Lear, or Macbeth, or all three during the course of a year.

I don’t do all the roles on my own of course. I let students take leading parts if they want, but I know where all the good speeches are. As for my audience, the students are always captive. They all must take English classes and Shakespeare is taught in every grade from nine to 12. This is far better than selling soap as an actor.

Within these parameters, the students and I get to play and improvise with Shakespeare. His plays are like jazz standards in that they are constantly surprising. I’ve taught Shakespeare for over 20 years and am still astounded how different a scene or speech can be interpreted. At times I’m amazed at how a student can find a fresh way of saying a line or expressing an emotion without ever having read the play. This is true of students who have English as their first or second language. Once they figure out the basics of reading Shakespeare, they often clamour to take parts. I think this is because we play with the scenes rather than kill them with analysis.

We all know the old phrase, “Those who can’t do, teach.” In effect, because I can’t master sports or music or acting, I fake it. To play in a slow pitch world is to not play in the big leagues, where men are men. I must seem like a dilettante to the professional actor, athlete, or jazz musician. I have great respect for the time and effort it takes to be professional in those fields. And yet, I can’t shake my belief in playful enjoyment in these fields.

In a self-reflexive way, the same dynamic might apply to this degree. I haven’t followed the same trajectory as most of my fellow PhD candidates. I’ve continued to work at my job full time while completing this degree. Because of this, I haven’t had to
hustle for grants or fellowships. I haven’t had to publish an article to prove that I was legitimate. Choosing autoethnography as a methodology means that I don’t have to do the serious semi-scientific research that most PhD students do. Coming at this as an older student, I don’t need to perform for the academy as if my career depended on it.

There is freedom in all this. I wouldn’t call studying for a PhD slow pitch, but I also realize I’m not doing my paper on statistics.

This slow pitch approach is also true for my stories. Why not publish them like a real author by going from publisher to publisher? Instead, I get to slow pitch them as part of a PhD. My advisors, while tough, are respectful and sensitive, and I trust that they will read my writing.

So it seems as if my life has been a series of short cuts - except for teaching; teaching has been anything but slow pitch. A teacher can get pulled into the vortex if s/he’s not careful. The frenzied pace in the story “Two days” is real. There is always another meeting to attend, or student to worry about, or team to coach, or essay to assign and mark, or a class to teach. I often compare teaching to an acting company that must put on four plays in one day. There is no way to slow pitch the fact that there is a new audience of thirty students every eighty minutes. The trick to staying alive in the profession is to protect oneself against the vortex.

A friend of mine who spent time on the tugboats had a wise saying, “One hand for the boat and one hand for yourself.” That is, do your best to make sure the boat is working well, but if the boat is going down, you need to take care of yourself. I’ve seen too many teachers who have given both hands to their schools and left teaching early because of burn-out. Teaching is not slow pitch but fastball.
But is this enough? Do these stories only show the need for a “slow pitch world” for people like me? Or is there another way to respond to these stories?

**The Psychological Approach**

Anthony Storr, a Jungian Psychotherapist, wrote in *Solitude* (1988) about artists who suffered loss or bereavement as children. The list is impressive as Storr divided the poets into two groups: those who engaged in self-destructive behaviour as a result of their bereavement and those who did not. He began with the English poet William Cowper, whose mother died when he was six. Storr told of Cowper's harrowing fall into mental illness. He then went on to tell of other poets haunted by loss:

Cowper is not alone amongst poets in having suffered from bereavement and recurrent episodes of severe depression. We now know that John Donne lost his father when he was four and that he was recurrently suicidal. William Collins, Samuel Coleridge, Edgar Allen Poe, John Berryman, Louis MacNeice and Sylvia Plath all lost a parent before they reached the age of twelve, and all suffered well-attested periods of depression. Coleridge was addicted to opium; Poe was intermittently alcoholic, used laudanum, and may have been dependent on it; MacNeice was an alcoholic, and both Berryman and Plath committed suicide. (Storr, 1988, p. x)

Storr (1988) then went on to list poets who suffered loss but did not fall into the same debilitating depression as the first group:

There are also examples of poets who have suffered early bereavement, but who did not, or are not known to have, suffered from attacks of depression which were so obviously severe as to be labeled mental illness. These poets include John Keats,

Keats lost his father when he was eight, his mother when he was fourteen, one brother when he was six, another brother when he was twenty-three. His maternal grandfather died when he was nine, his maternal grandmother when he was nineteen. An uncle died when he was thirteen. He wrote in a letter, “I have never known any unalloyed Happiness for many days together; the death or sickness of someone has always spoilt my hours.” (p. 129)

And yet, as Storr (1988) pointed out, Keats did not fall into the same type of debilitating depression as Coleridge or Plath. Whether this resilience is a question of genetics or some other cause, Storr was not able to answer.

The more important question is why so many artists who have lost a parent at an early age turned to writing. As a Literature teacher, I’ve also been interested in this pattern and have added more names to the list. The poets Ben Jonson, Robert Herrick, Richard Lovelace, and Jonathan Swift all lost their fathers before they reached the age of 10. The Brontes lost their mother at three, and Virginia Woolf lost hers at 13. Storr (1988) explained the connection between early loss and creative expression in the following way:

Writing and other creative activities can be a way of actively coping with loss, whether this be the loss of current bereavement or the feeling of loss and emptiness which accompanies severe depression originating from other causes. The creative act is one way of overcoming the state of helplessness which, as we have seen, is
so important a part of the depressive state. It is a coping mechanism; a way of exercising control as well as a way of expressing emotion. (p. 129)

Storr (1988) didn't think that a person has to experience this kind of loss to become a poet, but the connection is intriguing. He then looked at other patterns that emerged from this type of loss, citing David Aberbach's (1982) analysis of Wordsworth and Chaim Bialik's poetry. While both poets suffered from early bereavement, Aberbach doesn't see their fixations as entirely creative and positive:

The effects of loss and family disruption are reflected in many of the salient characteristics in the poetry of Wordsworth and Bialik: the haunting presences and objects, sometimes obviously a parent or a parent figure; the yearning for a lost paradise; the emphasis upon feeding; the motif of union with Nature; the general mood of isolation, desertion, depression, guilt; and finally, the hostility. The chief 'Romantic' quality of their poetry—the exploration of the self—can be seen as an attempt to buttress the self, made weak by childhood loss and consequent emotional instability. (p. 140)

The emptiness and hostility that Aberbach and Storr mentioned are repeated in the life stories of a number of artists in Solitude.

Looking at my own life, I have to admit that these two adjectives also apply to me. I look at my stories and wonder why it appears as if things just “happened” to me. I think this has to do with the emptiness that I felt in reaction to my father’s death. I see myself almost as a bystander to events that took place around me. I participate in these dramatic situations, but I'm not sure how I feel when they are occurring.
I also know there is a hostility beneath these stories. I’m still angry enough to want to denounce the coach, teacher, priest, administrator or student.

It might appear as if I’m battling against perceived injustices, but my anger is often the engine that drives the stories. It might be useful to look at the stories more closely and see if these patterns of emptiness and hostility emerge.

Returning to Storr’s analysis of loss, I can perhaps now see why I would return alone with the priest to the cabin a second time. The sense of emptiness was pervasive in my life at that time. I mentioned in one story that I dreaded Friday and Saturday night with nothing to do. I’m sure this is true for all teenagers, but for me the endless walking around the house, turning the TV on and off, and sense of deadness was paralyzing. I needed to feel wanted. The priest and his distant cabin fulfilled that. And then, as I grew older and more capable of being alone, I turned away from it.

Is this why I stayed in what was, in hindsight, an abusive relationship with the priest? I think this is partially true. I felt no sexual desire for him, but his attention and teaching were attractive and the notion that we engaged this strange relationship under a priestly license intrigued me. Luckily, the retreat experience only lasted two years. I can’t imagine what a decade in a cult would be like.

How has this affected my teaching? Perhaps because of these experiences, I’ve always been wary of getting too close to my students. I think a high school student should never have to worry about whether a teacher has ulterior motives for being friendly.

However, my wariness had its downside too as I don’t allow myself to get too interested in what my students are doing. I know many good teachers who have been
strong, supportive mentors to students without ever having abused them. Some teachers live for their relationships with their students.

In some ways I’ve avoided that kind of relationship because of my confused experiences as a young person. “The child is father to the man” as Wordsworth puts it, and that saying cuts both ways.

But mine is not the only story of abuse by Catholic priests. Recent sexual abuse scandals, particularly in the Catholic Church, mean that my memories of the cult are never forgotten. The daily headlines of abuse by adults against children show how widespread the practice has become.

Even at university we can see how notions about sexual abuse are confused. It was with some shock that I read *Understanding Foucault* by Danaher (2000). While the book does an excellent job explaining Foucault’s complex philosophy, I found the section on sexuality troubling. Danaher (2000) wrote,

For an example of this we can look at the example of pedophilia. During the late 1990’s, the media regularly presented shocking and scandalous accounts of pedophilia and, in 1998, reported that Interpol had mounted a major operation to trap ‘cyberpedophiles’—an internet club whose members swapped photographs of children. Although a coordinated series of raids in twelve countries netted only a few dozen of its members, it was hailed as a major and an important success in the battle against perversion. Whatever we may think about the use of resources given that other dangers faced by children—hunger, war, over-work, domestic violence—the scale of the project and, presumably, its cost signal just how seriously Interpol, and by extension society more generally, views pedophilia.
But in ancient Greece, as mentioned above, homosexual relations between men and boys didn’t signal a ‘deviant desire’, a scandal or a crime, but an expression of friendship, a pedagogical practice (the ancients considered that knowledge was transferred from teachers to students was a sexual act) and a social, as much as an erotic pleasure. (p. 137)

Danaher referenced Foucault’s research into ancient Greece in his *History of Sexuality, Part Two* (1984). Foucault pays particular attention to the Greeks’ notions on the sexual relationship between an older man and a boy. Clearly Foucault was historicizing this concept when he looked at how the ancient Greeks viewed this type of sexual relationship and how we view it today. But some of these notions are still troubling:

Foucault writes that in Greek culture there was a clear positive association with the aggressive role of sex but the passive partner was considered in a negative light. Thus, what is to be said of a culture that permitted same sex acts but also operated in a world that ascribed moral values to two distinct roles in all sex acts. The relationship between men and boys troubled understandings of aphrodisia. For example, the Greeks believed that the attraction to young boys was natural but the activity of penetrating another man who will one day be your equal was problematic. Furthermore, the Greeks were confused as to how much pleasure the young boys should feel or express in these situations. This led to a series of games, codes and roles for these relationships. The young boys were supposed to refuse, resist, flee, or escape. That would ultimately start a game that would lead to a process that “determined the right time and the right conditions” for the action to take place (Foucault, p.224). In these situations, the boy gives out kindness and is
expected not to experience pleasure and the man acts on the terms of the pleasure he will enjoy (Foucault, p. 224). Foucault reminds the reader that while the Greeks permitted these relationships, they worried about its implications. (Killian, 2006, par. 25)

The words ‘the right time and the right conditions’ are to me the most striking. In the end, what’s being discussed are grooming behaviours. It is unsettling then to read how Understanding Foucault, written 15 years ago, suggests that a few examples of pedophilia might have been blown out of all proportion. The general tone of Danaher’s (2000) interpretation is that society wastes too many resources on what the ancient Greeks considered a “friendship” or a “pedagogical practice.” In effect, it is not that big a problem and not as widespread as some lurid headlines might suggest.

The outpouring of thousands of stories of sexual abuse against Catholic children and First Nations children in residential schools, children in bizarre Mormon sects, hockey players, Scouts, and high school students has been well documented. The fact that the abuse of children on the internet has skyrocketed in the last 10 years tells us that these are not isolated problems.

As more and more people are disclosing the abuse they suffered as children, we realize that these traumas do not go away, nor are they a few examples blown out of proportion. While hard to believe, the Daily Telegraph in an article entitled, “Inquiry uncovers widespread abuse by Belgian priests,” reported that there was not a Catholic congregation in Belgium where abuse did not occur (2010, par.1).
So, while I agree with Foucault’s notions of looking at history to analyze power and subjugation, I have trouble agreeing with Danaher’s interpretation regarding pedophilia. What is it but another exercise of power, in this case of an adult over a child?

The above is an example of how events that happened to me can quickly turn into a larger cause. Why would I be concerned about a comment written in a 15 year old book because of a problem that occurred to me 40 years ago? Why go to all this trouble? Why let such a strange story out in the first place?

I’ve often wondered why I would want to tell this story. I wrote most of it some years ago and yet it doesn’t go away. I feel somehow as if it needs exposure, despite some of its more lurid qualities. It may be therapeutic for me to let the story reach a wider audience.

**Reflections on Glue**

My intent in telling “Glue,” was to tell of an education I received in an entirely different world. Clearly the epiphany in this story was the moment when I realized that we all might die. I don't tell this story to promote racist stereotypes of drunkenness and violence. However, I did want to tell the story as I remembered it. At the camp, I felt as if time was standing still and that eternity could be perceived in a moment.

Despite these hair-raising moments, I have never felt such peace as I did with that group at the camp. I felt a sense of community with the First Nations teachers and students that I'd never experienced before.

I was reminded of that sense of peace while reading Jo-Anne Archibald’s, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* (2008).
Archibald researched the ancient tales of the Sto: Lo people of the Lower Fraser River. Aside from the stories themselves, Archibald’s careful process of getting to know the elders of that area and gaining their trust is impressive. With time, the stories emerged and an ancient heritage was revealed. The sense of peace that I felt back on Lillooet Lake is similar to how I felt reading Archibald’s stories.

I also have the realization that there are two worlds here in B.C. One is the western world, with its sidewalks and tall buildings. But beneath that is a world that has been here thousands of years, that of the First Nations. It has been suppressed and brutalized but, like the grass, keeps reappearing out from under the concrete.

In the end though, I realized that, despite our differences, I began to see beyond my romantic view of First Nations culture. As the director of the documentary *Reel Injun* (2009), Neil Diamond puts it,

> But there’s always a risk with white people, who seem to have this desire to romanticize natives, that they’re not seeing us as people. We’re just ordinary human beings. We aren’t all in tune with nature. We don’t all speak to spirits and spout words of wisdom. But white people like to see us that way. (Monk, 2013, p. 4)

It’s hard to say it any better than that.

One might wonder how I could have gone from such a brutal high school and yet never felt the need to respond violently when the students in “Glue” swore at me. I never felt the urge to rage at my students in the way I had witnessed at Vancouver College. I might have used some of my Catholic guilt on them when I felt that they weren't working hard enough, but for the most part, I took the abuse. I can only imagine how some of my
own high school teachers would have responded. But for me, I felt no need to violently assert my authority. It was like a switch I could turn off.

I felt lucky to be a part of that community even for so short a time. The tragedy of Rick's death bothers me to this day as he was such a charismatic person with such potential.

I mentioned that I thought I was “helping” in this story. I think that I did bring missionary fervour to this job no matter how well disguised. I thought at first that I would help out "the poor natives." My students disabused me of that notion in a number of ways and, after a while, I started to see them, not as part of a cause, but as individuals.

**Reflections on Portage**

This is really where I first became an English teacher. It’s interesting that I wanted to teach the Romantic poets even back then. I’m not sure how good I was, but the desire to teach was there.

I come from a long line of teachers. My grandmother, originally from PEI, taught in a one-room schoolhouse in Alberta. My dad taught briefly in a one-room schoolhouse in the Peace River country. He then became a social work instructor at UBC. My mum was a professor of social work at UBC for 25 years. I imagine, because of this, that standing in front of people and passing on information is in my DNA. Whether the information I’m imparting is correct or not is another question, and this story bears that out. Still, it’s ironic that my first attempts at English instruction should take place in a French milieu.
I remember when I was still playing in bars in Quebec that I would give lessons on the history of the blues at the local College. They must have thought I was pretty strange, an English guy with a bad French accent instructing Quebecois students about African American music.

The wonderful thing about Quebec is that they don’t tell you not to do things; they tell you to try new things. They always asked if I had written any new songs when I performed in bars. This encouraged me to write more. They never laughed at me as I stumbled through my French, because they recognized I was trying.

It’s not the same in English Canada. The old joke about the difference between the American lobster tank in the restaurant and the Canadian one is that the American one has a lid on it. The Canadian one doesn’t need a lid because the Canadian lobsters are always dragging their escaping lobster brothers back down. Portage let me begin teaching because no one dragged me back.

**Reflections on Beatrice**

I thought I had to put one positive memory in the mix. It also has such a bizarre set of circumstances, that it fit my definition of the absurd. Besides, as I said in the story, "There is nothing like being a young student and falling in love with someone different every day while reading great literature.” I still think this is true.

**Reflection on Two Days**

Carolyn Ellis used the composite method in her book entitled, *The Ethnographic I* (2004). She calls it a novel, but it reads more like a series of meetings with real students over the course of a particular year. The interactions seem as if they have come from one direct experience, but Ellis informed us that the vignettes with her classes and interviews
were made up from a number of different years. I felt cheated when I first read this, as if she wasn’t being honest. But then I decided to try the same composite technique with “Two Days.”

A composite of this kind is not a direct, factual recollection of events, but a combination of days designed for dramatic impact. I wanted to give the sense of the rush, the panic, the absurdity, and the futility of a day in the life of a teacher.

It is a composite of days that occurred in the middle of my career. I know I’ve had similar days to these, but the events here are cobbled together into two days for maximum effect. The Muumuu, the oversized classes, the feckless administrators, the accreditation meetings, the English meetings, the union meetings, the dream, the memory of my friend, the tears during the poem all become one great blur. And this is true of some days teaching. I was trying to change things by being on as many committees as possible. It led to many sleepless nights.

Teachers often talk about out-of-control-classroom-dreams. However, I think mine also originate from what I saw as a high school student at Vancouver College. The fear of unruly students taking control might have been part of the teachers’ brutality in that school. All I know is that control of the class is an ever-present dynamic in my dreams. I try desperately to not bring this fear into my classroom while I’m awake, but some of that energy must still be there. My Grade 9s tell me I’m “scary” when I’m displeased. This may be just because I’m old; in any event, I appreciate that they can tell me this. There are some teachers that “lose it” every day as they yell and belittle the students. I can’t imagine what their dreams are like.
“Two Days” was originally entitled “One Day.” By the time I finished writing about one day I thought I’d stop. But when I came back to it later, it felt unfinished as a story and I decided to try to add more composite memories to the second day. It was while writing this section that I remembered my friend, Jim, and how I cried in front of my students while thinking of him. In a way, this part of the story connects with my confused notions of masculinity found in earlier stories.

I realized that my homophobia might have had something to do with the advances by the priest. By the time my friend had died, I realized I had to stop being ambivalent about my relationship with gay people. There was little connection between the priest and my friends that were gay. This realization became true of my life in general. I had to look at what Bourdieu (1977) would term my “habitus” as a white male from the west side of Vancouver. I had some de-conditioning to do. I had to stop seeing myself as different from others and try to become part of a larger picture. We all might be different people from different races, cultures, and sexual preferences, but I had to learn that no one group should feel marginalized in my life or in my classroom.

In the "Two Days" story, I still had the energy to rush around a school, somewhat like the younger man in “Glue,” hoping I could change things by running.

Then, as often as not, something stopped me. It might have been summer, it might have been the death of a friend, or a family problem, or a dying mother, or a strike. But once stopped, I would get depressed because it all seemed so futile. Nothing seemed to change; right-wing governments still win elections and continue to cut back on public education. Then, one fine day in summer, when I eventually pulled out of the depression,
I swear I would do things differently; I’d try to do one thing at a time, to be mindful, careful, attending to the moment.

Then, the year starts and the committees begin, and the rush begins and the stomach aches and sleepless nights begin, and there is the windmill again, and Don Quixote aims his lance at it and charges once again. Then I’m stopped by the next summer, or illness, or death.

No wonder there are so many stories of teachers dying in the first year of their retirement. We’ve been on a nasty treadmill for 30 years and then suddenly the treadmill stops. And then, not long after, everything stops.

**Reflection on Claire**

I think the reason that I include this story is that it was the moment where I made a break from my own strict rules. The phone call with Claire’s mother made me see that there was something missing in the way I taught young people.

In my early years as a teacher I was critical of other teachers supposedly trying to “scam” the system by taking months or years off for supposedly bogus health problems. It was true that some teachers do “work” the system to get time off. However, what I now realize is that many teachers need the time off as they age. Mortality becomes much more real in the latter part of one's life and illnesses linger.

Students have special needs as well. I used to think that students admired my sense of justice, that if there was a rule, it stood for all students without exception. For example, any work handed in late would be docked marks as it would be unfair to the students who handed the work in on time. Then, I started to see where this approach was
lacking. The sound of Claire’s mother on the phone made me realize that my philosophy could go only so far.

I found this was true in other ways. Two of my finest writers were First Nations students, a boy I taught 20 years ago and a girl five years ago; both handed their work in late. Twenty years ago, I lowered the boy's mark for being late, even though it was brilliant. I can still see the disappointment on his face after I'd taken marks off his poems, plays, and short stories because they were handed in late. I justified this approach because I knew that my rules were the same for all my students. But over time, I realized this approach was stopping some students from handing in their work.

Five years ago I did everything I could to get the girl's work in to me so I could read it. I didn't care if it was late, I cared that I had it in my hands to read.

Other students didn't make a fuss. They know what's going on in a student's life far more than I do. If I had been unfair in the way I assessed them perhaps they would have resented it, but students also respect when a teacher is a human being rather than a judge.

I still feel some guilt when I read the Claire story. I was trying to be tough without trying to understand what was going on for that girl. In his poem, "Snake,” (1921) D.H. Lawrence puts it well: “I have something to expiate—a pettiness.” I'll never shake that feeling.

Reflection on Another Breech in the Wall

I think there is a connection between the rigidity of the instruction I received as a boy and my adult obsession with standards in English. At first, I told myself I was becoming a teacher for "peace, love, dove" reasons, much like a latter day Alan Ginsberg.
But the Catholic tradition of counting how many angels could dance on the head of a pin soon entered my professional pursuits. In my case, I had to track how many students graduated high school with high marks when they were not proficient in English.

At first, I was somewhat excited when I saw my name in the Maclean’s article. But then I began to worry about the students I had mentioned in it. I wanted the mark-buying to stop, but I didn’t want to violate the teacher-student relationship. I worried that I had sacrificed them for my cause. They remain un-named, but I used them just the same.

The problem of standards still exists. While the province did some initial investigations on the fly-by-night schools, new ones seem to take their place. As a result, English instruction has changed in the province.

Teaching English these days is like building a wall. I wish it could be more like a river or a flower, but it's really more like a wall. Sure, we still have the odd class that looks at a poem, but the demographics of most English classes has changed so much that what we teach is not the same.

Pressure comes at us from a number of angles. The Ministry of Education makes students write provincial exams in Grades 4, 7, 10, and 12. Certain expectations come out of this; for example, students should be able to read and write at their grade level. In Grades 10 and 12, these are two hour in-class exams. The results are published online and the exam mark is compared to the mark the English teacher gave. This means that we can’t avoid the issue by giving every student an “A” (English is the only major government exam given to Grade 12 students in B.C.).
The universities also put pressure on English teachers. High schools must ensure that students accepted into universities can read and write at a university level. Students should be able interpret literature and write about it in a sophisticated fashion. However, English teachers are often told that many students have slipped through the wall and managed to get into university without these skills. As UBC English department head, Stephan Guy-Bray, recently put it, “Anyone marking first-year English notices that a lot of students just aren’t up to it. They’ve managed to get into university without basic English skills” (Vancouver Sun, July 18th, 2012). So, high school English teachers are being asked to put more bricks in the wall so students don't slip through the cracks. How is it that so many students are graduating from grade 12 without proficiency in English composition? Why is there a wall? Why make it so hard on students, especially those who are learning English as an additional language?

The universities provided their own answer to this question by bringing in the Language Proficiency Index (LPI). Based mostly on composition skills, a student was not admitted to UBC if s/he didn’t achieve a five out of six on the LPI. This seemed rigorous enough. Then the standard started to change. When the LPI first came out, a student who achieved lower than 86% in high school English had to write the LPI. Later, this was reduced to 80%, and now is pegged at 75%. It's not that difficult to get a grade of 75% in English. These days the wall is starting to look like a picket fence.

If the wall is so porous getting into university, in what ways can it be better constructed in high school? The answer, sadly, is the in-class essay. To get a true reading of a student’s abilities, I mark four compositions a term, three of them written in class. That makes 12 marked compositions per year, per student. A student should feel as if
they’ve been marked on something substantial and writing is the best way to do that. Yes, reading and oral participation are important, but most of the mark should come from writing. An English mark comes from a variety of compositions, not just posters or quizzes.

Some students write well, some do not. My job is to encourage students who write well to go even further in their writing. For those who have difficulty, my job is to help them become better writers. And yes, there are errors. If a student writes about a past event in the present tense, or doesn’t know how to use an article or a preposition, it's an error. If the concept of plural or possessives in English is confused, it will be confusing for the reader as well.

I think there should be a wide variety of compositions. Some should be purely creative and some should be formal and expository. Students should be able to stretch out with their writing. Some compositions are taken home, but most are done in-class. Why? To avoid the soul-destroying experience of marking plagiarized work. Because so many students want to get into university, the temptation to steal work off the internet or have the tutor write the essay is too powerful. The only sure way to counter this is to have most of the work done in class.

But isn’t it just as soul-destroying to mark 55,000 papers over 27 years? Yes, in some ways it is. Every year, I assign a final essay in most of my classes. I do this so that the marks level out. But because I mark them near the end of term, I don't always get a chance to return them. The odd student comes back to find out why they received the mark they did, but most are happy the year is over. As a result, I'm left with 150 marked essays that no one picks up. How futile is that?
However, the other 15 compositions are handed back, graded, with positive comments and suggestions for improvement. By using this approach I am able to see the trajectory of the students' writing from the beginning of the year. While it's a great deal of work, I feel I know the students and their writing by the end of the year.

I’ve tilted at the windmill of English standards for the past 10 years. Some changes have been made, but I know the wall will still be shakily standing long after I’ve left the profession.

**Reflection on Across the Great Divide**

I worried about this essay the most. Foucault suggested one should be reflexive, but it's a bit harrowing to be reflexive about the institution giving the PhD. Still, one of my tasks is to write about education and I think the great divide needs to be addressed.

When I first started at the university the conversations didn’t seem to connect. I was fine when I was talking to my fellow high school teachers about my experiences in the classroom. They’d nod and pay attention for a minute or two and then go on with their lives. My colleagues seemed to get the gist of my teaching experiences. But when I'm talking to most academics from the university, my tales seemed to draw blank stares or knowing smiles, giving me the sense that I was missing something.

What was I missing? How did my experiences in the classroom not match theirs? Weren’t we both in the field of education? Weren’t my experiences somehow connected to theirs? Why that knowing smile, or worse, that sense that I was missing out on a huge piece of the puzzle, like a dark family secret known only to a select few?

I decided to find out. And thus began a longish story of discovery. There is another world at the university, a world based on a complex set of ideals and beliefs. In
some ways, of course, it should be like this. The professors had been reading and thinking
and writing and talking about education for much longer than I. I had just been doing it.

And academics are fine people. There is a kindness, a ‘politesse,’ that you find in
a university that you rarely feel in a high school. But beneath all this, there is intense
competition. Academics have to work very hard to get where they are. I’ve seen the
beginnings of it in my fellow PhD students. They hope that their hard work will land
them a job in a university with a salary that increases. This is different from high school
teachers who belong to a union and achieve the same top salary no matter how hard they
work. The good news about unions is that they prevent too much competition. Sniping,
bitching, complaining, yes. Competition? Not so much. Whereas university professors
can publish, research, and even teach their way into very high salaries. The trick is that
you have to compete to get there. To compete, one must be constantly looking for a new
area of expertise, a niche, no matter how far this is from the average classroom. A sample
of the recent courses or lectures offered by an education faculty attests to this: "Young
people and the global imaginary: History, empire, and identity politics in transnational
borderlands." " Allegories of the Present: Curriculum Development in a Culture of
Narcissism and Presentism."

I’m sure these are important issues, but I’m not sure I know what either of these
titles mean. Someone does, and they have found a niche market. However, I’m also quite
sure that "transnational borderlands" and "presentism" are not being discussed in high
schools at the moment. This creates a divide.

My story about author intention and comparing it to cooking a meal is simplistic,
but it shows the disconnect between high school and university. As high school teachers,
we are often made to feel as if we are doing something wrong. And this too creates a divide and defensiveness.

For me, much of my defensiveness can be summed up with one name: Michel Foucault. It seems as if many universities follow Foucault's critical stance; he has been a part of every class I have taken in my doctoral program. In some cases he played a larger role, in some cases not, but he has been omnipresent. I remember reading Danaher’s (2000) *Understanding Foucault* and agreeing with his notions of the gaze, the panopticon, and resistance to power. To understand the divide between high school and university, I felt I had to understand Foucault and his views.

Foucault had a complex view of power. After the tortures and executions pre 19th century, the dominant classes had to find new, humane ways of exercising power. As Foucault puts it, power had to become more "restrained," and, in doing so, the agents of power also had to change: "As a result of this restraint, a whole army of technicians took over from the executioner, the immediate anatomist of pain: warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, educationalists" (Foucault, 1977, p. 11). Gabriel Rose encapsulates Foucault's thoughts on power in the following way, “Foucault was interested, not so much in why, but how power is exercised” (Rose, 2007, p. 145).

Foucault did not believe power was only one-way. He was also interested in the notion of resistance. He felt that," When there is power, there is resistance . . . a multiplicity of points of resistance" (Foucault, 1997, p. 95). In an interview in 1980, he demonstrated, using a simple example, the dynamics of power and resistance:

Power should not be understood as an oppressive system bearing down on individuals from above, smiting them with prohibitions of this or that. Power is a
set of relations. What does it mean to exercise power? It does not mean picking up this tape recorder and throwing it on the ground. I have the capacity to do so—materially, physically, sportively. But I would not be exercising power if I did that. However, if I take this tape recorder and throw it on the ground in order to make you mad, or so that you can’t repeat what I’ve said, or to put pressure on so that you’ll behave in such and such a way, or to intimidate you—well, what I’ve done, by shaping your behaviour through certain means, that is power . . . I’m not forcing you at all and I’m leaving you completely free—that’s when I begin to exercise power. It’s clear that power should not be defined as a constraining force of violence that represses individuals, forcing them to do something or preventing them from doing some other thing. But it takes place when there is a relation between two free subjects, and this relation is unbalanced, so that one can act upon the other, and the other is acted upon, or allows himself to be acted upon. Therefore, power is not always repressive. It can take a certain number of forms. And it is possible to have relations of power that are open. (as cited in Hartman, 2003, p. 3)

As usual, Foucault goes in a number of different directions at once, but the key point is that he sees power relations as multi-faceted and complex. I think it is key to realize that teachers and students are in a power relationship. To deny this is naïve. The fact that teachers grade students clearly shows a power imbalance. However, Foucault takes the analysis of the relationship deeper by telling us that, "...one can act upon the other, and the other is acted upon, or allows himself to be acted upon." He also suggests that students can be engaged in resistance when the relations are not open. We know from
James Miller’s biography of Foucault that he engaged in resistance himself. First, he was involved in Tunisia during a student uprising and secondly, in Paris during May, 1968 (Miller, 1993, p. 15). Foucault actually joined students on the rooftops throwing stones at the police. These concepts help me see high school and authority differently. I began to see Foucault in a new way, despite the divide. One can be critical of authority and engage in resistance while still being part of the machine.

The divide between town and gown is still there. The comments about professors are still heard in the school staff rooms. And, while I’m not privy to them, I’m sure there are the odd comments about teachers spoken in hushed tones in universities as well. But I can see how both need each other. The universities must keep in touch with the schools so we can know what the other is about. As long as the schools don’t become too philistine or the universities too out of touch, there is hope for future years. In geographical terms, “the great divide” is the high point of the mountain range, where rivers run down one slope or the other. The divide is still there in education, but I can also say I’ve taken a few rivers on both sides of the divide and the view looking down those long slopes can be wonderful.

**Final Reflections**

“He stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block”

“Preludes”—T.S. Eliot (1920)
I feel that my soul has been “stretched tight” by writing these stories and reflections. I feel this even more so now that they are going to become public. This is the strange sensation of trying to openly tell my truth. I hope it is seen as “giving an account of myself,” as Foucault (1997) puts it, rather than tales told in the confessional box.

Looking over the stories and the essays, I can see two different people at work—both of them me. On the one hand, I seem to be obsessed with standards and rules, and on the other I can see where these rules must be broken. With the “Claire” story in particular, I realize that enforcing rules doesn’t get to the heart of why I teach. Foucault (2003) said that power works in multiple ways and I can see this in my stories. I’m either reacting to power imposed upon me or I’m imposing power on others. I sometimes fill in the empty spaces of my life with a cause or crusade that I can champion. While I hope to change things for the better, these frantic causes never seem to still the futility of everydayness.

This isn’t helped by the constant pressures in any given day. I remember giving one presentation called “Dichotomies.” In it, I listed some of the ways I felt pulled in two directions:

- Standards versus creativity
- High School practicality versus University theoretical
- Teaching versus administering using forms/keeping attendance.
- Teaching students versus learning from students
- Students responding to literature essays versus writing autobiographical essays
- Work life versus a creative life outside of work
- Taking care of my child versus taking care of other people's children
Teaching the author's biography versus pretending the author is dead

Pen and paper literature versus e-literature

Experience the world as it is versus cyber experience

Reading from print versus reading on-line

Qualitative versus quantitative

Modern versus post modern versus (post-post-modern)

PhD versus retirement.

Public life and private life

And the list goes on and on.

To “dichotomize” is defined as “cutting asunder” and these dichotomies divide a teacher in many different directions. Some might suggest these are false dichotomies that are artificially constructed. I don’t agree. One might find common ground in one or two of the above, but not in all. It seems the nature of the educational beast is to divide. Eventually something has to give and one is forced to choose one side or the other.

At the outset of this enterprise I suggested that I’d like to “see into the life of things.” This turns out to be a daunting task. It’s risky to tell stories and then to discuss the stories I’ve told. And yet, with the telling, I see how autoethnography yields some unexpected results.

I realize that many of my stories are about authority and my reactions against it. The authority of the coach, priest or administrator bothered me when the events occurred and bother me again in their retelling. Another example of reacting against authority can be found in the discussion of this dissertation. When I wrote the "slow pitch" section, I wasn't thinking of my oral defense. I spoke about being a dilettante in sports, music,
acting, and then I came to the PhD itself. My mind naturally connected the slow pitch approach with my doctoral studies and I thought, "Why not be reflexive?" I wrote two sentences that I think show the complexity and confusion when trying to write "truthfully." In the first sentence I said, "Coming at this as an older student, I don't need to perform for the academy as if my career depended on it. There is freedom in all this." I did feel freer when I wrote this. It was summertime and I had come to the end of a free-form section on my newly discovered slow pitch philosophy. But these words had quite a different meaning at my oral defense with five examiners from the academy questioning me. I clearly was performing for them at that moment and any freedom I once enjoyed seemed far away.

The second sentence reads, "Choosing autoethnography as a methodology means I don't have to do the semi-scientific research that most PhD students do." This also appears too glib, as I pretend as if my stories or reflections don't matter; that none of the courses, the endless hours reading, writing and discussing meant anything to me. This of course is not true. Beyond the countless hours of scholarship, this kind of innovative research takes an enormous emotional and philosophical toll. To be asked questions at an oral defense regarding truth, freedom and literacy, one must have thought about these things in some depth beforehand. So, both of these sentences don't really present a complete truth.

I've always worried about keeping these sentences in my dissertation. They seem to be taking reflexivity into dangerous waters. At what point does honesty become a liability and begin to double back on itself? At times, it seems as if I'm saying that I was only in this enterprise for myself. Strangely, there is still some freedom in all this. In the
end, I did do this for myself. I have the freedom to say this despite my fears of being judged. I accept that my examiners have control over me and my future and, as gatekeepers, they have every right to reject my work. Does that make my freedom any less true? I don't think so. It just makes the generosity of my advisors and examiners more poignant. I admire the fact that U.B.C. as an institution would even let me consider saying such a thing. But when we talk about reflexivity, I think we have to allow that uncomfortable truths will appear. This then is another dichotomy. On the one hand, I am doing innovative research where I can use terms such as "freedom" and "semi-scientific" with impunity. On the other, I can't escape the fact that, as a dissertation, my work will be highly scrutinized. Perhaps truth is like Alice's looking glass where one can see into both sides and still see the opposite view. Eventually though, looking at one's reflection must end. As Donnard Mackenzie warned, this hyper reflexivity can become dangerous and at some point Narcissus must move away from the pool. Or like the Lady of Shallot, one must move away from the mirror and see the world as it is.

I found that by trying to see patterns in these stories, I learned more about why they happened and why I behaved in a certain way. By looking closely at one’s own experience, as Sparkes (1996) put it, “you are stimulated to reflect upon your own life in relation to mine,”(p. 467). I can only hope this is true for others reading this work.

While it would be difficult to evaluate this dissertation using traditional methods, I think some comments can be made with regard to replicability.

First, one limitation is that the information presented here is only my own. However, I think the process of discovery used in this kind of dissertation is a method that can be used by other teachers. Teachers need only look at their own stories and write
them down as honestly as possible. Whether they want to analyze the stories is up to them. Teachers should be encouraged to tell stories that reflect who they are, not who they should be based on the latest educational trend. Teachers often sardonically list the number of great educational innovations that have come and gone over the years, “The Whole Child Movement,” “The School Climate,” “The Year 2000,” “Positive Inquiry,” and on and on. Not that there is anything wrong with these ideals, but they tend to focus on everything but the teacher’s real experience - not where the teacher is, but where s/he should be.

The intent behind autoethnography is to have the teacher begin with his/her own memory and experience - her or his own moments of regret or joy. These cannot be imposed from above, but can only come from within. The process of doing this, then, can be replicated. All it takes is the desire to trace memory and write the stories down. Each person’s stories will be entirely different. The process can be replicated, but the results never can be. My hope is that there are other teachers who want to tell their stories and will be inspired by this work to do just that, and with any luck, to do it better.

This kind of research follows Richardson’s (2000) evaluation in that it should “contribute to our understanding of social life,” have aesthetic merit, be reflexive, impactful, and express a reality.

I also think this research follows Eisner’s (2007) insistence that research “is supposed to contribute to the quality of education students receive and that arts-based research must ultimately be appraised to the extent to which that aim is realized.” Autoethnographic research is based on the everyday experiences of the classroom and thereby is focused on “the quality of education children receive.” It can assist classroom
teachers to better understand their roles by analyzing their motivations, wrong turns, and eventual successes, so that students can be educated in a humane, compassionate way. I think that for a teacher to write his or her memories will be helpful when s/he asks his students to do the same. When the teacher risks, so too can the student. When we understand ourselves, we understand our students.

Exiting

“Exit strategies,” they call it. And I’m starting to get what they mean. When I mark my 30th essay and write “good work” in the margin with a mark attached I know I'm exiting. No more digging for the right word that will match the work I see before me. I want to get these papers marked and back to the students fast; I feel as if time is running out, that I must get this work done quickly before a catastrophe hits. I want to get out alive.

My intent prior to this has always been to somehow reflect back to the students a part of their inner life that they shared in the paper. This philosophy goes back to my Grade 8 teacher, who encouraged me to write. I imagined that she wrote wonderful flowing comments on my compositions, inspiring me to fly higher.

I recently found my composition notebook from her class. I was surprised to find that she had mostly written “good work” on my stories. However, it was the feeling that she had actually read my stories that impressed me. Once I made a very bad pun in a composition and she wrote, “Peter . . .” But that one little “hello” showed that she’d read it and got the joke! And that meant everything.

A program on Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales has just played on TV and I perk up wondering, “Can I use this in class?” This is a constant question as I imagine showing it
to my Grade 11 or 12 students. Is it a ‘cheesy’ program, as they put it, or does it have merit? This is the utilitarian function of every teacher, always imagining how something can be used in the classroom. When the material is good, it can be good for decades. Just like good poetry, a good TV program can be used again and again. There are always new things to use in class—new novels, new TV shows, new videos on YouTube, new plays, new short stories written by new people. It’s a constant search. I’m like a magpie constantly looking for shiny things to bring back to the nest.

After I retire, how will I learn to look at things only for what they are, for my own enjoyment, not to imagine how they’d be used in the classroom? What to do with all these magical overheads, films, worksheets, books that I still have stored away? Will these be thrown away as Prospero threw away his magic books? Or will they be passed on to a young teacher who pities me as I pack up my classroom for the last time.

Every September as I feel the cold winds of autumn blow, I start to think of Beowulf, as it’s the first work studied in the Lit 12 class. There’s something primal about that text - a going back in time when the setting and characters were close to the earth, close to the turn of the seasons. In the late days of August, I walk in the woods to summon up the feeling of being a hunter in a primordial age. I needed to imagine this to be able to transfer that feeling onto my students when they read the text. In the last few years I’ve taken my class out into the woods to read the beginnings of Beowulf. Surrounded by trees and rocks, it’s not hard to imagine Grendel being out there, an evil that is also primordial. My students look around the woods as I describe how Grendel comes out of the shadows to attack with no warning. I won’t need the cold winds in September or the woods for that purpose now. September will soon mean something
entirely different, something equally primal and equally profound, but not for my students.

**The Stratford Man**

Shakespeare has been my great companion as a teacher. Whenever I felt unsure or rudderless, I knew that soon I would be teaching Shakespeare and feel grounded in great art. It is one of the great joys of my life to have shared Shakespeare with countless students and to see their eyes light up with joy and wonder at his words, the twists and turns of plot and the deeper currents of his themes. As I age, I find that teaching *King Lear* becomes more and more important and difficult to read. How to deal honestly with one’s aging parent and how to deal with one’s too honest daughter are reflected back to me in the play. And yet the depths that Shakespeare takes us to—the gouging out Gloucester’s eyes, Lear’s view of the naked Edgar as ‘unaccommodated man’—are sometimes too hard to take.

My students often ask why Edgar leads his father to a make-believe cliff to experience the taking and redemption of his life. I can’t answer these things completely, but we acknowledge that there is beauty there—absurdity and beauty at the same time.

I also teach *A Midsummers Night’s Dream* and see the joy and wonder in the eyes of Grade 9 students as the characters discuss love in all its inane wonder. When the fairy kingdom confronts the human world, Grade 9 students are young enough to know that these two worlds still interact in our world today.

One of the greatest moments in my teaching career occurred while reading *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Well aware of the shortened attention spans of modern, distracted teens, I thought I had pushed it too far by reading the play for an entire half
hour. But it was a good part of the play—when Bottom is won over by the queen. When we got to the end of the scene, I asked the students what they wanted to do next and one girl asked if we could keep reading. Many other students chimed in and said, “Yes, could we?” This may not seem like much, but to me it was everything. It’s a gift when students reach out to the teacher.

I also think there are equally important moments where a teacher reaches out a student. I think back to my Grade 10 year. We were reading *Julius Caesar*. I was given the part of Brutus. I read a particularly long speech trying to understand the twists and turns of Brutus’ mind as he justifies killing Caesar. At the end, the teacher, someone I admired, said, “Well read.” That’s it, two words, but it meant everything to me.

And here I am 27 years later teaching Shakespeare to students. Every now and again I say, “Well read.” Who knows if it has the same effect on them? Who cares? I know it will work on someone. I don’t need them to become teachers, but I want them to become literate people that enjoy Shakespeare—that’s my job and sometimes it pays off.

Behind me is a grove of beautiful trees. They’ve been planted over the last 27 years and many are starting to bear fruit—a garden of trees scattered all over an island that have responded to sunlight and rain. All have been buffeted by storms and yet they survive. I realize that there is something in this rough magic that students can take away with them. A story planted here, a poem planted there.

I’ve been tapping students on the shoulder and encouraging them more lately, as if time was running out. I haven’t done enough of this in the past. My most precious moments as a student have been when someone says to me, “You have something special. Go do this special thing.” From the “Well read” above, to the Lit teacher saying
to read about Wordsworth in the library, to getting the lead role in the school play—all these pulled me out of the mundane. One of the greatest writing moments I had in high school was when I was asked to do the yearbook write-ups for the graduating class.

That’s how they did it in those days; one person wrote them. I was given sheets with the grads’ likes and dislikes and I wrote those short paragraphs on each person. I was under tight timeline, but the words flew out of me. Someone entrusted me with a task.

Being tapped on the shoulder can have its downside as well, and this can be seen in the “Priest and I” story. Since being tapped on the shoulder (as well as other places) in that circumstance, I’ve been wary of too tightly knit groups, cults, and showy productions. Perhaps this has been to my detriment. I became too wary and cynical about all grand productions.

For the most part, I wanted my students to feel they were treated the same and that no one was special. If I steered a student in a certain direction, I tried to do it with little fanfare. We’ve all seen where too much familiarity can lead.

Yet, I feel as if I haven’t tapped enough students on the shoulder. I didn’t say, “You’ve got amazing talent, let it out!” But I’m doing it all the time now. I’m sure I’m becoming a nuisance. If I see a talented student languishing, I can’t help myself. I try to find a way to get them to shine. The results have been amazing so far. Students who sat at the back of the class looking disgruntled are now front and centre strutting their stuff—some in plays, others in music.

Yet, even here I’m drawn to the shadowy character of Shakespeare. Who tapped him on the shoulder? I imagine him going to his first play, perhaps an outdoor affair in Stratford that his father took him to see. Later he was recognized in London by a patron,
perhaps the Earl of Southampton (By the way, I do agree with the “Stratford Man” theory rather than the fads suggesting Shakespeare had to come from the nobility. His tales of rustics in the woods from As You Like It to A Midsummer Night’s Dream even to The Tempest remind me of someone who has spent time in the country, with country people, and has seen the magic of the forest in the moonlight or sat under a tree in the noontide heat of the day). Then later, he was in London, a country boy in the great city, and someone decided to encourage him with his writing.

How did I first meet this shadowy companion? After my father died, I pretended I was normal for three years. Then, my mother took the insurance money from his death and travelled with my sisters and me to England, specifically to Stratford.

There we saw a production of Hamlet and I was caught. The story of a prince whose father was suddenly taken made sense to me. How Hamlet was to live his life in a world full of deceit and confusion made sense to me.

I remember sitting at the back of an English bus on that trip reading the Signet edition of Hamlet (the same that I use in my classes today). I must have seemed like a maniacal teen completely possessed as I whispered the magic words, “Oh, that this too, too solid flesh would melt.” I loved the footnotes, which could be quite risqué. I also loved that I was embarking on something real that had intellectual merit. Little did I know back in 1970 that it would nourish me for the rest of my life.

But as I said earlier, it’s more King Lear these days than Hamlet. It’s more the autumn of my teaching career than the neurosis of a 30 year old. Perhaps like Gloucester in King Lear, I’m jumping off the imaginary cliff of retirement only to find I’m still alive and that there is food and hope for future years.
I began this enterprise by saying that teachers tell stories and that these stories are
"...as varied, and yet as regular, as waves on an ocean shoreline." Now, on a different
beach, I'll watch different kinds of waves come in.
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