

A Meditation on the Semester, begun During a Fifteen-minute Silence
May 9, 2005

This has been a most interesting semester. I had four course releases: for representing my English Department in CONNECT, a consortium of Southeastern Massachusetts schools of public higher education; for facilitating the NECIT seminar; and as chair of the Academic Programs Standard for accreditation. I was to teach just two courses, Journalism and Introductory Writing. I decided to make the journalism course more trouble for myself (I thought I would have the time) by cobbling together my own course book, because the journalism textbooks out there were, to make a long story short, just bad, and of course over-priced. The Introductory Writing class would be challenging in the way that it always is, skidding and sliding through the ice of February, the mud season of March, teetering on the brink and finally pulling itself up onto the road way, the spinning wheels gaining traction at last. It always works that way.

This semester was special because of the course releases. My three projects, as I started calling them in my mind, ran into each other along a spectrum. First, NECIT pushed up close against my teaching experience. I found myself thinking, thinking, thinking, constantly. It also pushed me up close against my colleagues in the seminar: those I didn't know, I started to know, and those I knew I came to know better. While the experience made me question myself and my teaching constantly, it made me see the world as a better place because of the seminars with my colleagues. We were caring and thoughtful people. This was also true of my second project, CONNECT. In my association with my colleagues from Massasoit and from Bridgewater, UMass/Dartmouth, Bristol, and Cape Cod, we thought more about curriculum rather than teaching and learning—but the mere fact of significant communication among the five colleges was significant. Some in the group thought it highly significant. Again, one of the best parts was the communication among people, with a larger conference to come on June 1st. CONNECT bridged the deep, focused experience of NECIT with the broad institutional experience of producing a document telling the story of the academic programs of Massasoit, my third project.

Writing the report for the Academic Programs standard is a challenge under the best of conditions. One of eleven standards, it constitutes about a third of the accreditation self-study. The accreditation assignment, as it turned out, managed to bring many of my most prized weaknesses to the

forefront. I have trouble planning and delegating: but chairing a committee requires forethought and organization, meeting scheduling, and asking other people to do things. Maybe I have control issues, maybe I'm passive aggressive, certainly I'm disorganized. I don't know. All this was made more difficult by our college being on work to rule. Some committees didn't seem to have a problem with work to rule. Mine did. (See: delegation.) When I tried to schedule meetings, most people couldn't come, some wouldn't, and so I grumbled in my porridge and said, "I'll just do it myself." (In truth, I was at least half on the side of anyone who claimed work to rule.) The nature of the assignment brought me close up against the institutional being of the college, and that's not where a sensitive guy like me really wants to be. This is a pretty good college, with many bright spots, doing great work for its community. But doing a self-study means hearing about the problems.

So, from the brightness of NECIT through the limited but real accomplishments of CONNECT to the variable sunshine, clouds, rain, hail, frogs and brimstone of Academic Programs, it sure promised to be an interesting semester. Then it snowed.

It snowed and it snowed, and in some sense the snow has scarcely melted. I have (this morning) two classes left in my Introductory Writing class, and for many of the students, the wheels are spinning in mud and the car is going for the cliff. The days of missed classes created at least two weeks of confusion, and I'm not sure if the semester really ever got started. Also, *a propos* of NECIT, after about six students vanished into the ether, a majority of the class remainder were students born in other countries. Several were of the what-is-she-doing-in-Introductory-Writing variety. (And next semester some Comp. 1 teacher will be saying, "What is she doing in English Composition?") Most work too many jobs for too many hours, and many were absent too often. Achieving continuity was tough. Now, in May of 2005, I am, or the course is, or they are, by any measure, a month away from their wheels achieving traction. So in a semester when I have learned more, thought more, processed more about teaching and learning, especially in regard to students who really need to be included and to include themselves into the classroom and the course material, I have done what feels to me like the worst job of work I have ever done before, in what's left of my memory. I know: it's not all my fault, I didn't make it snow, every developmental class is its own statistical anomaly, some students did very well, yadda yadda. But I have not, through the slipping and sliding of my

feet, walked the walked. I say to myself what Bartleby said to the lawyer: "I know where I am."

At this point I want to say a few things about getting older. I was upset when I made sixty; I didn't think it would happen to me. I was further upset to find that I, who had always said that I would teach until I couldn't, was starting to think about retirement, to look forward to it even. Last year, when so many of my colleagues left, I was shocked into a new awareness: what did they know that I didn't? (Also, as colleagues like Stephen Tooker and Joan Baker left, I felt like somebody else's lunch boxes were now in my backpack, and they had left the hike.)

So, amid all the thoughts of teaching and learning, of institutional difficulties, of aging and retirement and my own, personal Worst Teaching Job Ever, on Friday, May 6, my family enplaned to Indiana to see Rebecca, my youngest child, walk across the platform wearing the funny hat. Landing in Dayton, Ohio, we drove across the flat corn fields and across the state line, through the Walmart sprawl and struggling downtown of Richmond, Indiana, until we came to the beautiful leafy campus of Earlham College, on this bright May day epitomizing the small liberal arts college, its brick buildings interspersed with giant poplars, oaks, maples, and ash, the campus gussied up with tulips and azaleas. Earlham is a Quaker college, and don't you forget it. Trust, love, listening were affirmed everywhere. The graduates showed this in their self-confidence and their affection for their school and each other.

The baccalaureate address was given by Vince, one of my daughter's psychology professors. It was masterly. He spoke slowly in a soft, gentle voice, and he said how a good teacher must always learn from his students, and because he paid close attention to his students, he had learned well the lessons of procrastination and avoidance, and so, the night before graduation, all he had written of his speech were a few rough notes on the lid of a pizza box. He continued on that note, making himself small and funny, going to Walmart at midnight to buy a class gift, telling the clerk about the Class of 2005 so he could buy an appropriate gift (an oven mitt). As he lovingly described the Class of 2005, he almost lost it. (I envied his emotion: I'll be happy and proud for my 2005 graduates, immensely so for some, but I won't feel what he felt.) Then his funny speech became a little sad, and then serious, as he followed his students out into the World, with faith, hope, and love. Or perhaps Faith, Hope, and Love. It was brilliant. Better than brilliant, it was Good.

Then there was silence. For fifteen minutes we, graduates, parents, sisters and brothers and cousins and friends, grandparents, aunts and uncles, sat and listened to the wind, the trees, our thoughts, the revving motorcycles on Route 40 from the Other Indiana, and our thoughts. I guess the idea is that thoughts that are bigger than yours might also emerge, and that the Inner Light and the Truth, "that of God in every person," "the Inward Teacher," will speak forth. Fifteen minutes, strangely, wasn't long enough, even on those rented plastic chairs. I am still listening for what I might have heard.

Two sides of Earlham were always on display. It's a serious place, and most graduates get further degrees. It's got purpose. Earlham offers a Peace and Reconciliation major, and the business program focuses on NGO's and non-profits. Over two thirds of the graduates had spent a semester off-campus, with the two most popular being Tanzania and Northern Ireland. One central event, often referred to, was the death last year of Rebecca's good friend Billy Palinski, who died suddenly of a burst spleen. Billy, who stayed once at our house (about fifteen kids have crashed here over the years), was a special kid, so alive as to be unimaginable dead, and his friends and his remarkable parents have kept him with them. They hold him in the Light always. Moments—not moments, but minutes—of silence punctuated every event. Quaker plainness and seriousness was on display. But there was a Gospel Choir and Dance Alloy talent show. Everybody sang and danced. The gospel choir defined inclusive: races, religions, ages, students, staff, town liaisons, faculty. One woman was prominently pregnant. Two others wore lovely blue head coverings. Dances included traditional modern stuff (these girls were dancers!), hip-hop (these kids could dance!), belly dancing, middle eastern dancing that looked a lot like belly dancing, and what was referred to as the Man Dance, in which a group of non-dancing, clueless guys expressed those talents clearly. The Man Dance ended with Rebecca's alternate brother, Sean, folding up his cell phone, putting it in his back pack, and walking off stage. Also, throughout the speeches of remembrance from the students, there were many, many references to the Theoretically Dry campus. Billy would have been proud.

Between the morning Baccalaureate and the afternoon Commencement, I wandered into the campus bookstore and bought a book titled The Inward Teacher, a collection of essays, a *festschrift*, to honor the retirement of Paul Lacey, who had taught literature at Earlham for about forty years. I guess he was something special. The essays came from

colleagues and students. (One is by the prominent educator Parker Palmer, author of The Courage to Teach. Note to NECIT: one for the list.) I read most of these essays at night at the motel and on the flight home. I am still absorbing its context—the frequent references to the Inward Teacher, “that of God within,” of silence and listening, of the immensely transactional notion of teaching and learning. I think of Rebecca Shipman in a NECIT seminar almost apologizing for mentioning Spirit in her reflection, and I ask how we came to *this* sorry plight. My mind has been engaged in word play—it always is—about the contrast between “values” and “value added.” As has been true all semester, I’m thinking and thinking. I’m not sure where all these thoughts are going, or if they will go far at all as the Indiana spring turns to the hot, humid Indiana summer. As I return to my last two days of class with my underserved, under-achieving Introductory Writing class.

The night before graduation, in the motel, I read a New Yorker article by Jerome Groopman about a new trick in medical education: patient simulations involving complicated, programmable realistic dummies. The idea is that a medical student should perhaps practice on dummies before practicing on people. One section of this fascinating article really got to me: experienced doctors who viewed simulated sessions reacted with, to borrow a phrase, shock and awe. After watching medical students face simulations in which blood pressure dropped, nurses made demands, anesthesiologists (all part of the act) shouted contradictory advice, and the “patient” screamed in pain, the doctors were stunned and fearful. They were of course afraid to be tested themselves, seeing as much if not more pressure in being publicly tested than in dealing with a real patient. Also, one doctor who did participate in a simulation recalled early in his career a real experience closely matching the simulation—one in which the patient died, partly because he missed something. She was old, ill, failing, she probably would have died anyway, probably even the correct diagnosis could not have saved her. In short, she died. He was shaken.

This article brought me back to me in my class. I am shaken. True, if not everything, many things did go wrong in this class. I did not always do things that I know how to do, even with no anesthesiologists shouting at me. Despite theoretically being free this semester to think and apply my thoughts and the good instruction and models of my colleagues to my class, I somehow did not do so, or at least not effectively. I even allowed (or failed to prevent) a language-based seating pattern to emerge. All this was in my head on graduation Saturday as I sat in silence for fifteen minutes—the joy

and idealism of Earlham, the fantastic luck of my children in having access to a traditional education, the beautiful Indiana day, my troubling semester, my college, and years of life and parenting behind me and in front of me.

At the end of the graduation ceremony, after yet another minute of silence, the recessional music began. The faculty, poised to march out, listened in confusion, smiled in delight, and then joyfully boogied up the aisles to the beat of—strangely and appropriately-- “I’m Too Sexy for my Shirt,” and caps were thrown in the air, some sticking in the trees. The rest was hugs, tears, and an evening of partying and barbecue scattered all over the small residences, the “friendship houses” of this theoretically dry campus.

I write this now, introspectively, meditatively, perhaps self-indulgently on this busy Monday morning, to preserve this moment. I will return to it in time, both in reading and writing, to further explore the many thoughts that crossed my mind over this wonderful weekend. But like all good community college students, preoccupied and tardy, I have to shave, throw on my clothes, and drive to class, hoping for a good parking space. Back in the World again, I will strive to hold these moments—and all moments when important things end and commence—in the light.

R. Pepp

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