“An Imperishable Attitude”: A Memoir of Learning and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Reflecting on past experiences is an important problem-solving technique when teachers face new situations. In fact, teachers’ attitudes and practices are highly influenced by their prior experiences as both learners and teachers. This paper is based on the premise that growth as an effective teacher is enhanced when one reflects more deeply about what one believes about teaching and learning—and why. It considers the use of memoir writing to gain insight about how one’s values, attitudes, and perspectives about teaching and learning are “formed.” A memoir is defined as a combination of story telling and essay writing, both narrative and reflective. During the 2003–2004 academic year, the author led a “writing community” at the University of Minnesota that helped participating faculty write their “memoirs of teaching.” These memoirs focused on periods in which the faculty members’ values, attitudes, and perspectives about teaching and learning had been especially influenced. In addition to co-leading this community of “memoirists,” the author also participated in writing his own memoir of teaching. This paper presents that memoir.

“Experienced” teachers should be better teachers than “inexperienced” ones. Educators within agriculture, natural resources, or the life sciences will likely not challenge the intuitive logic of this assertion. In fact, professional knowledge and development scholar, Donald Schon (1983), has noted that reflecting on past experiences is very important as professionals consider new situations and problems. Stephen Brookfield (1995) states, “...the influences that most shape teachers’ lives and that move teachers’ actions are rarely found in research studies, policy reform proposals, or institutional mission statements.” Brookfield further notes that the most important influences informing a teacher’s actions are likely to be the “memories and experiences...the images, models, and conceptions of teaching derived from [their] own experiences...” Thus many—perhaps most—teachers have defined their values, attitudes, and practices in teaching largely in response to their own experiences as learners and teachers.

My premise in this paper is that for academics to continue to grow as effective teachers, they must live examined teaching lives. In this regard, teachers are well served when they honestly consider what they know and believe about teaching—and learning—and why. As part of such self-examination a teacher needs to explore the rationales behind their professional philosophies and practice, their “imperishable attitudes,” if you will. And in this regard, it is usually helpful to examine in some depth one’s own history as a learner and teacher.

Karpia (2000) has proposed that autobiographical writing for adults can be a powerful approach for initiating “…a process of self-exploration and meaning making that, in turn, can promote the development of an enlarged view of themselves and the world around them.” One form of autobiographical writing that has gained increasing recognition in recent years for its value in prompting such self-reflection is the memoir.

Patricia Hampl (1999) defines memoir as the “intersection of narration and reflection, of storytelling and essay writing.” Thus, a memoir is not just setting one’s curriculum vita to words. Hampl (1999) has stated that preparing a memoir involves not only writing about what one knows, but also to find out what one knows. Memoir writing has begun to find its way into the academic community—and especially within faculty and teaching development circles—as an approach to fostering deeper reflection about teaching.

During the 2003–2004 academic year, I co-lead a writing community at the University of Minnesota that focused on helping each of the participating faculty to write her or his memoir of teaching. The faculty in this community were encouraged to identify periods of their lives during which their deeper values and attitudes about learning and teaching were influenced. In addition to co-leading this community of colleagues through one-on-one and small group discussions, workshops, and retreats, I also participated in writing my own memoir of teaching.

This memoir describes a “formative” time of my life during the late 1960s and early 1970s before I entered graduate school—and even before I had conclusively decided that I would seek a career in academia. During that time I served as an Air Force Missile Launch Officer in Wyoming; the experiences I had then as a student, practitioner, and instructor were some of the most influential in my life. They helped me to define values, attitudes, and perspectives about learning and teaching to a greater extent than other periods of comparable length in my life. Many of these values, attitudes, and perspectives are remarkably intact today, although subsequent experiences have, of course, refined them. This memoir presents the story of my “imperishable attitudes.”

WRITING THE MEMOIR

Hampl’s (1999) definition of memoir indicates that one’s approach to memoir writing should include both “story telling” and “essay” elements. Although memoir writing has a number of qualities in common with writing a personal journal, it is also distinctive in that a memoir writer usually has an “audience” in mind. As I began the process of writing my memoir, I regarded my audience to be other university teachers from a range of disciplines, not just science and agriculture. The community of memoirists with whom I associated in the writing community at Minnesota included faculty from agriculture, art, education, English, economics, human ecology, law,
natural resources, sociology, and theater. My writing partner during the writing process was a faculty member from English and we found that, despite our disciplinary differences, the process and value of writing our memoirs of teaching were similar.

The first step in writing my memoir was to define some of my “core” values, attitudes, and perspectives about learning and teaching. I then asked myself why I hold those. What was it about my past experiences as a teacher or learner that helped me to “form” these particular values, attitudes, and perspectives and to hold to them so strongly? In other words, “Why do I believe what I do about teaching and learning?”

Parker Palmer (1998) has stated that one of the most fundamental questions that can be asked about teaching and those who teach is, “Who is the self that teaches?” As I examined my own introspective questions, it became clear to me that many of my values, attitudes, and perspectives about learning and teaching traced their “roots” to a 4-year period when I served as an Air Force officer. The farther I went, the more evident it became that this relatively brief period in my young adult life needed to be the focus of my memoir of teaching.

I spent additional time thinking about specific incidents, events, and experiences from that period of my life. I had thought about some of these many times before, but others had not been in my conscious memory for years. As I pondered these diverse recollections, several began to take on particular significance for me. One thing that became evident to me as I selected the various events and experiences to include in the memoir was that most of them had occurred at distinct times and were of relatively short-duration.

However, some incidents that I considered including in the memoir assumed less significance as the process went forward. For example, one event that I had originally thought of including was the time when my Combat Crew Commander and I failed one of our qualification evaluations. However, as I reflected on that experience and its significance, I realized that, although it had been personally traumatic and memorable, that incident had not influenced my values, attitudes, and perspectives about teaching and learning in a “formative” way. I thus chose not to include it in my story.

Another important aspect of the memoir process for me was having a writing partner who read early drafts of my memoir and offered helpful “responses.” Her responses were not typical editorial critiques, such as grammar and organizational structure, but rather she offered more qualitative impressions and insights. She also asked incisive questions that caused me to think more deeply about the events depicted in the memoir and their “meanings” for me as a learner and a teacher.

A final factor that helped in writing the memoir was my reflection upon a particular photograph from the cover of a Sierra Club book that I first encountered during the time considered in the memoir. This photo has since become symbolic for me of that time of my young adult life, and it provided an important “thread” that gave thematic continuity to the memoir. I also decided to include some selected quotes from documents, song lyrics, and other books that were significant to me during that time. I have found that inclusion of such symbolic and stylistic elements helps readers to better relate to my story and to see their own experiences in a new light.

The writing of my memoir was, at times, difficult. Besides the emotional impact of recollecting and reconsidering events of such large importance for me personally, there was the recurring challenge of finding an appropriate balance between “story telling” and “essay writing” within the memoir. Whichever “voice” I chose to use at any point while writing the memoir—narrative or essay—I always asked myself how I could interpret my story more effectively, not only for my own sake but also for the reader’s.

THE MEMOIR

Most important is an imperishable attitude, a philosophy if you like, a way of laying out the world and of planting ourselves in it…

—Terry and Renny Russell from *On the Loose* (1967)

It is, for me, a treasured photograph (Fig. 1). It shows a young man standing alone on the rocky central California coast near San Simeon. His back is to the camera and he is looking out toward the ocean, afternoon sunlight illuminating his sandy blond hair. He is playing a guitar and perhaps singing, although one cannot be sure since his face is not visible. I first encountered this photograph, which graces the cover of a popular 1960s Sierra Club book titled *On the Loose*, during the year of 1969. The photo and the book itself had a powerful attraction for me at that time—and still do. A quote from James Joyce accompanies the photo:

He was alone. He was unheeded, happy, and near to the wild heart of life…

**Fig. 1. Cover of On the Loose, by Terry and Renny Russell (Russell and Russell, 1967). Copyright © 1967 by Sierra Club. Reprinted by permission of Sierra Club Books.**
I had seen the Pacific Ocean for the first time in the fall of 1968 while I was stationed at Vandenberg Air Force Base (AFB), which is located along that same California coast depicted in the photo on the book cover. I, too, had experienced sunny afternoons looking out toward the ocean and feeling “happy and near to the wild heart of life.” I identified strongly with that “free spirited” young man; I, too, was “on the loose” for the first time in my life. Or was I?

The year 1969 is etched into my memory for reasons other than that first encounter with the photograph of a guitar man. It was the year of the Woodstock rock festival. I did not attend that event. It was a time of intense discord regarding the deadly and divisive Vietnam War; there were many anti-war rallies and protests. I did not participate in any of those. And it was the year when the film Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid was a huge hit. I did go to that.

During the fall of 1969 I had the opportunity to return to Vandenberg AFB once again. This time my “mission” was to be a member of the “Combat Crew,” which was to launch a Minuteman Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) into the Pacific Ocean test range. On a bright October morning, four of us Launch Officers drew straws to decide who would have the opportunity to leave the Launch Control Center to watch the missile after we had completed our launch procedures. I drew a “long” straw, which meant I was one of the ones who could leave. The officer who drew the shortest straw stayed in the Launch Control Center to observe the post-launch indicators on the launch console and to monitor radio communications with mission headquarters.

Even though I had seen films of Minuteman ICBM launches before, as part of my Launch Officer training, I was still not prepared to actually witness the astonishing speed with which the missile erupted from its underground “silo.” As I stood on a hillside outside the Control Center, which was located about one-half mile up the coastline from the silo, I marveled at the missile’s beauty as it arched toward the west, its white “contrail” gleaming in the sunlight. I watched for a few minutes until the missile had flown beyond my sight and then I reentered the Control Center. To my amazement, the mission control voice on the radio was indicating that the missile had already passed Hawaii and was descending toward its intended target in a lagoon in the South Pacific. My fellow Launch Officers and I were later told that “our” missile landed within yards of its target after traveling 5000 miles in about 20 minutes.

A young man looks out upon the Pacific Ocean and plays his guitar.

A young man looks out upon the Pacific Ocean and watches an ICBM missile streak into the western sky.

Two men—alone—and near to the wild heart of life.

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Don’t you understand what I’m trying to say?
Can’t you see the fear that I’m feeling today?
If the button is pushed, there’s no running away.
There’ll be no one to save with the world in a grave.
Take a look around you, boy,
It’s bound to scare you, boy...
—Barry McGuire from the song “Eve of Destruction” by P. F. Sloan (1965)

Lt. Simmons is an outstanding officer who possesses expert job knowledge and performs assigned tasks in an exemplary manner…His crew was chosen Wing Crew of the Month for February 1969 on the basis of their high standardization and Emergency War Order proficiency examination averages…

—Capt. Thomas Walker from “Officer Effectiveness Report” (August 1969)

It was my hardest job—ever. I was just 21 years old when I arrived at Vandenberg AFB in the fall of 1968 to begin the training that lead to my certification as a Minuteman Missile Launch Officer. My permanent duty assignment, after completing missile school at Vandenberg AFB, was at Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, WY. Warren AFB had the distinction at that time of being the only Air Force Base in the world with no landing strip and no permanently assigned airplanes. Its sole mission was to support the deployment, operations, and maintenance of Minuteman missiles distributed in “silos” scattered around the region of the base. The base had formerly been an army cavalry post and many of its buildings are registered as National Historic Sites. I served at Warren AFB until my discharge in June 1972.

I have never had a job that carried more responsibility or was more stressful. On each of our 24-hour tours of duty, my Combat Crew Commander and I had control over 10 nuclear-armed ICBMs from our Launch Control Center situated 60 feet below ground. On good days, all 10 green “on alert” lights on the Launch Control Console (each light representing one of our missiles) remained illuminated. But when there were mechanical malfunctions or security violations, we would receive alarm indications and would initiate response procedures that involved following any of a number of prescribed checklists. Sometimes these procedures included dispatching maintenance or security personnel to the unmanned missile silos, which were located several miles from our Launch Control Center. These missile sites were connected to the Launch Control Center via underground cables that permitted the Combat Crew to remotely monitor the “status” of each missile. There were 20 Launch Control Centers and 200 missiles, under the jurisdiction of Warren AFB, that were spread over a wide geographical area in southeastern Wyoming, western Nebraska, and northeastern Colorado.

The “worst case” scenario—one that all of us Launch Officers thought about but seldom discussed—was the prospect that we would one day receive a coded “launch message” from the Strategic Air Command (SAC) Headquarters in Omaha, NE. That message would order us to execute the launch checklist that culminated with each Combat Crew member turning a key that would send an electronic “launch vote” to the missiles and initiate the launch process. Each Launch Control Center had “veto” capability, which was intended to counter any launch attempts that were unauthorized. But if two Launch Control Centers within the same squadron had submitted their launch “votes” simultaneously, their missiles were going to be launched and there was nothing that anyone could do about it. So the “security” of the missile launch system, with respect to protection against unauthorized launching of nuclear weapons by the USA, came down to just four Launch Officers within the same squadron. That level of security seemed fairly tenuous to me even then. But each of us had undergone stringent background and psychological screening during the
process of being selected for the position of Launch Officer (each of us was accorded a “Top Secret” security clearance) and we assumed that this safeguard was sufficient. Furthermore, I expect we all lived in denial that such “doomsday” scenarios—authorized or unauthorized—would ever happen.

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Outside myself, pretending to know me.
Inside myself, where is the soul of me?
Who am I? What am I doing here?

—The 5th Dimension from the song “Broken Wing Bird” by Bob Alcivar and Kellie McKinney (1968)

My Air Force years from 1968 to 1972 were a time of laying out the world and planting myself in it. But they were not an “on the loose” time in the same ways as portrayed by the young man with his guitar on the California coast with whom I developed such an affinity. The world of a Launch Officer was very tightly controlled by the Air Force. Our actions, both official and private, were closely scrutinized by our commanding officers. For example, receiving even a routine parking or traffic ticket was cause for a reprimand by our commanders.

Perhaps most importantly, my Air Force years were a time of deep “soul searching.” It was the Cold War and my principal responsibility as a Launch Officer was to be prepared to respond to the President’s command to execute the “Emergency War Order.” It was an ominous responsibility and it is difficult for me now to recall the extent to which I processed the moral implications of my work then. I recall dutifully responding “Yes, sir!” when the Wing Commander asked me during my Launch Officer Certification Briefing in November 1968 whether I would launch my missiles if ordered to do so. Whether I could have done so, thankfully, I never had to find out.

But I remember being greatly troubled by the prospects and consequences for our nation and the world engaging in a total nuclear war. I sometimes sat at the Launch Control Console late at night while my Combat Crew Commander was asleep and stared at the lights that represented the alert status of the missiles under my control. At such times I often wondered about their intended purposes. We were never told the specific target destinations for any of the missiles under our command, but we did know that the solid-fuel Minuteman missiles carried only a 1-megaton warhead compared with the more powerful warheads mounted on the liquid-fuel Titan missiles that were also a part of the U.S. arsenal at that time. We had been told that our Minuteman missiles were intended primarily for military targets—airfields, missile sites, and the like. The Titans, we were told, were the ones targeted for Moscow and Leningrad and other major population centers in the Soviet Union. However, in reality each of the 200 warheads on the missiles under the command of Warren AFB was many times more destructive than the two atomic bombs detonated in World War II.

During such times late at night, I would also think about the persons who, that very moment, were sitting at some missile launch center in the Soviet Union watching lights that represented missiles that were targeted to destroy my base—and me. It seemed absurd to me even then but I “did my duty” and, with trust in God’s providence, I rationalized that a full-scale nuclear war was unlikely to occur. Surely, I reasoned, the leaders of the USA and the Soviet Union would never permit tensions to escalate to a point where nuclear war would appear to be a “reasonable” option.

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First articulated by Mezirow in 1978, transformational learning theory is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live.


My imperishable attitude toward my professional responsibilities such as teaching, as well as toward life itself, was formed out of incidents and circumstances encountered during my Air Force years. In fact, I can see now that some of those experiences were even more important than the ones that came later during my graduate programs when I was “officially” preparing for my professional career. Through one such circumstance during my second year on active duty, I came face-to-face with the reality of “transformational learning.”

Sometime during late 1969 or early 1970 the Launch Officers at my base were required to attend a Top Secret briefing that was delivered by a visiting General from the SAC Headquarters. Through this briefing we were to learn about the “next generation” of strategic weapons systems that were under development at the time, and some of which were slated to be installed at Warren AFB during the following years.

I recall few specifics of that briefing. I do recall that it was held in the base theater and that it was filled to capacity. I remember that the General used visuals to support his talk and that he included specifics about the Minuteman II missile system that was scheduled to be installed at our base beginning in 1972. The General described the “enhanced” capabilities of Minuteman II compared with the older Minuteman I system with which I worked. One aspect of his briefing that I distinctly recall was the description he gave of the capacity of Minuteman II warheads to be re-targeted, which Minuteman I warheads could not be. He also told that each missile in this new Minuteman II system would carry multiple warheads rather than a single one as with Minuteman I.

I responded to the General’s briefing in two ways that day. One reaction was that of bewilderment. I couldn’t imagine learning the complex launch and other procedures that would be required to operate and launch this new, more complicated Minuteman II missile system. Minuteman I was difficult enough for me and I was quite relieved when I learned that my tour of duty would be completed before the Minuteman II missiles became operational at my base.

My second reaction to the General’s briefing was deeper and more troubling for me. Even with Minuteman I, my mind had difficulty conceiving of the human and environmental destruction that would be caused if the missiles, with their 1000 warheads, were used in a nuclear war. However, the destructiveness of a nuclear arsenal with several thousand warheads, as with Minuteman II, was more than I could—or wanted to—imagine.

As I left the base theater that afternoon after the General’s talk, I was a different person. I had experienced the first stage
of transformational learning during that briefing and my perspectives toward my job, the Air Force, and the world would never be the same again. According to transformational learning theory, a process is set into motion when a person experiences a “disorienting dilemma” that creates a crisis that cannot be resolved by applying previously held explanations or assumptions (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999). I recall that during and after the General’s briefing I was both stunned and angry. I was dismayed at his apparent lack of comprehension and concern about the level of destruction that would be incurred if the “advanced” Minuteman II missile system were actually used. He spoke of this new missile system in a way that reminded me of a child talking about the bigger and better “train set” he had just received as a gift for Christmas. The General’s demeanor and his message flew in the face of my prior conception of myself—and of my commanding officers—as “reluctant warriors” who regarded the missiles as a necessary “deterrent” to the purportedly superior missile arsenal of the Soviet Union. The General’s briefing had presented for me a “disorienting dilemma.” After that briefing my level of “trust” was eroded with respect to the Strategic Air Command, the “military-industrial complex,” and even the Commander-in-Chief, the President of the USA. Some aspects of this shift in how I saw the world, and myself in it, are still with me.

I have faced other transformational learning situations since then—circumstances that have caused me to question preexisting explanations and assumptions about aspects of “my world.” For example, reading the book The Unsettling of America by Wendell Berry (1977) caused me to question agriculture at a more fundamental level than I had ever done before. It especially caused me to consider important questions regarding the “agriculture–industrial complex.” More recently, my observations regarding shifting university priorities on matters ranging from education/research priorities to intercollegiate athletics has challenged assumptions about, and attitudes toward, the “university–industrial” complex.

And I have observed transformational learning in my students as well. I recall a recent incident during a field-based course that I teach. The students and I were visiting a hog farm in Iowa and were beginning to tour one of the hog confinement facilities. I was standing outside the facility, toward the back of the line of students as they filed through a door and into the area where the hogs were confined. Suddenly one of the students, Ann, who had already gone into the facility, came bursting out of the door in tears and walked quickly to the side and stood there sobbing. I approached Ann to see what was the matter. Through her tears she said, “He was hitting them. I couldn’t stand it.” Ann had experienced what for her was a “disorienting dilemma”—a hog confinement facility. And for her it precipitated a “crisis.” How would she reflect upon and “make meaning” from this dilemma was yet to be determined.

Later, as I reflected on what I had witnessed with Ann, my mind reached back to my own early stage of transformational learning at that base theater at Warren AFB more than 30 years before. Although I did not leave the General’s briefing in tears, I had experienced frustration, anger, and dismay, as had Ann. The questions that his talk raised for me about my prior assumptions about my commanders and my Air Force work were every bit as profound as the questions Ann experienced during and after her first tour of a hog confinement facility.

Two things seemed pretty apparent to me. One was, that in order to be a [steamboat] pilot a man had got to learn more than any man ought to be allowed to know; and the other was, that he must learn it all over again in a different way every twenty-four hours.

—Mark Twain from Life on the Mississippi (1874)

Many aspects of my imperishable attitude about education were formed from my experiences as a Launch Officer. One of my perspectives, which is longstanding and strongly held, gave rise to a motto that I developed several years ago—all learning is re-learning.

As a Missile Launch Officer, the necessity to learn—and re-learn—was one of the most difficult aspects of the job. Each month we were required to pass a written Emergency War Order (EWO) examination; the pass grade was 100%, no errors permitted. That in itself was a challenge. But passing the EWO exams was further complicated by the reality that the “rules” kept changing, thus the necessity to learn—and re-learn. Furthermore, there were regular changes in other Launch Officer responsibilities as well and “tech data” changes with revised checklists were often issued to us. These resulted in our need to re-learn the missile operational procedures many times. As one fresh out of an undergraduate education where knowledge was often presented to me by professors as static and unchanging, this insight into the dynamic nature of knowledge and learning was a rude awakening.

Since those Air Force years, I have come to believe even more that all true learning is re-learning. One of our largest errors as educators in agriculture is to presume that our students are a “blank slate” and have no prior conceptions or understanding of the subject matter. Even students with no prior agricultural background, such as my student Ann in that field course, have formed prior assumptions and understandings regarding many of the things about which we teach in our courses. For them to learn what we are teaching usually involves modifying or changing their prior assumptions and understandings. Some of these are tightly held and are only reluctantly abandoned or changed.

The influence of previously held understandings, as it affects student learning, is illustrated by an incident that occurred in one of my crop ecology courses several years ago. I sometimes teach students in this course about the inter-relationships between the spacing of plants in communities of row crops and the patterns of water consumption by those crops. The research-based understanding of this concept is that much of the water lost by a crop over a growing season occurs primarily through the leaves via transpiration. Since narrow row spacing of crops tends to stimulate early development of leaf area, it has been shown that water is usually used more rapidly from narrow-row plantings than wide-row ones. However, I have found that this idea is counter-intuitive for some students, and

The experiences I had as a student, practitioner, and instructor were some of the most influential in my life.
especially ones with strong agricultural backgrounds and prior experiences growing such row crops.

I recall one such student a few years ago who wrote the following on an examination in response to a question about the relationships between crop water loss and row spacing:

While I agree with this concept in theory, I don’t know if I believe it. Last summer on our farm we switched from 36-inch rows to 22 inches. Our last rain in southwest Minnesota was around June 15, so water was our limiting factor throughout the growing season. However, we had one of our best yields ever—better than most farmers with wider rows. For this reason, I question the concept.

This student’s conception of the relationship between water loss and row spacing, which in this case seems to have been rooted in his own prior experiences on his home farm, were strongly held. Apparently, one professor teaching this student a research-based principle that was contrary to his prior convictions was not a strong enough “disorienting dilemma” to cause him to alter his viewpoint. In other words, although it was clear that this student comprehended the principle that I had taught and my rationale for it, he was not intending to re-learn—at least not yet. Educational theory, and particularly “constructivist” perspectives, maintains that students often must be encouraged to “construct” their own meaning if they are to re-learn a concept or principle. And experience, or more accurately “experiential learning,” is often central to this re-learning process.

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...Lt. Simmons would be an excellent instructor crew member.

—Captain Thomas Walker from “Officer Effectiveness Report” (August 1969)

In my first “Officer Effectiveness Report” in 1969, my Commander recommended that I be chosen as a Launch Officer Instructor with responsibilities for training newly arrived officers for their “certification” as Launch Officers before assuming alert duties. This assignment came to pass for me beginning in 1970 and was considered an honor within the culture of the Air Force. It also meant that I had fewer actual alert duty assignments each month, which was a good thing from my perspective. I spent most of my time as an instructor working with students in both the classroom and in a “simulator” that permitted them to actually execute the various operational and EWO procedures they needed to know to pass their certification evaluation. The simulator could replicate almost every kind of emergency or wartime situation that a Launch Officer might face. This learning environment was my first in-depth exposure to simulation/case-based and experiential learning. I have subsequently utilized simulations, decision cases, and other kinds of experiential learning extensively during my university teaching career. Thus, my present commitment to these kinds of instruction had their roots directly in that initial exposure during my Air Force years. As a student, I had not been taught with these approaches to any extent during my primary, secondary, or university education.

But there was one major difference in the kind of experiential approach to teaching that I practiced as a Launch Officer Instructor compared with my use of it now—it lacked substantive “reflection.” Launch Officers were taught to respond to emergencies and to receipt of the Emergency War Order. It was not in my job as a Launch Officer Instructor to prompt my students to ask incisive questions or to “think critically” about the meaning of their work. My role was to teach Launch Officers to act, not to think about the implications or meaning of those actions.

As noted previously, I have become an advocate and practitioner of experiential learning as I have progressed through my career as a teacher. I also have become a strong advocate for the importance of reflection (“making meaning”) within the context of such experiential learning. These advocacies are, I believe, a direct response to my early experiences as a Launch Officer Instructor.

In my own practice of using experiential learning approaches now—and from what I have observed with colleagues who also use them—it is common for the reflection part of the learning process to be shortchanged. This is often because we “overbook” our course or class and add “experiences” to such an extent that little time remains for students to process, reflect upon, and make meaning from those experiences.

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Now when I had mastered the language of this water, and had come to know every trifling feature that bordered the great river as familiarly as I knew the letters of the alphabet, I had made a valuable acquisition. But I had lost something, too. I had lost something which could never be restored to me while I lived. All the grace, the beauty, the poetry, had gone out of the majestic river!...

—Mark Twain from Life on the Mississippi (1874)

Because Launch Officers possessed Top Secret clearances, we were called upon to serve as “couriers” of classified documents or materials from one place to another. The most common such courier duty that Launch Officers performed was the regularly scheduled delivery of a new electronic “code pack” to each of the missiles under the control of our base. These were classified Top Secret and thus were handled and transported only by officers with such a clearance. My participation in this duty had multiple meanings for me. For one, it was the only opportunity that we Launch Officers had to enter the missile sites and to see the actual missiles that we commanded from the Launch Control Centers.

The code pack changes were accomplished twice per year, once in the summer and once in the winter. I have indelible memories that originated during code pack courier duties. For example, on one occasion my courier partner and I (the transportation of code packs was always done in pairs) had approached a missile site at night in the winter. As is common in eastern Wyoming at that time of year, the wind was blowing very strongly. It was customary to carry Top Secret documents onto the missile site and fill them out after the old code pack was removed from the electronic equipment and the new pack inserted. As I left the truck and began to walk toward the tall fence that surrounded the missile site, the strong winds whipped the documents from my hand and they flew away. My heart stopped as I considered the prospects of my classified documents being strewn all over eastern Wyoming and western Nebraska. Visions of my court martial for dereliction of duty danced in my head. To my great relief the pa-
pers blew against the fence and were kept there by the strong, steady wind until I was able to retrieve them all. Disaster averted.

But the courier duty experience that is most significant for me now occurred on a calm night during my second year of duty at Warren AFB. As my courier partner and I arrived in our Air Force-issue truck at the missile site where we were to install the new code pack, we radioed the Launch Control Center to gain permission to enter the site. That particular night, there was already a maintenance team on the site doing repair work on the missile.

Perhaps the one imperishable attitude, above all others, that has informed my practice as a teacher and learner has been my desire to recognize and hold fast to that which is genuine—to that which is “real.”

We left our truck outside the tall cyclone fence that surrounded the site and walked toward an inconspicuous, low concrete structure that represented the only access to the belowground missile silo. My partner and I entered through a small hatch door and climbed down a long steel ladder that led to the uppermost level of electronic equipment that surrounded the vertically oriented missile poised within the silo. The missile itself was no more than six feet away from me as I stood on the narrow “catwalk” platform and prepared to install the new code pack into the equipment cabinets. I looked toward the missile and scanned its full length, brilliant white in the glare of the lights that were being used by the maintenance team to illuminate their work. I experienced a mix of emotions—admiration and awe at the technological marvel that the missile represented, yet abhorrence and rejection of its nuclear destruction capacity.

My most significant memory that night came after we had installed the new code pack and my courier partner and I had begun to climb the ladder back to the exit door to proceed on to the next site that night. After climbing the ladder for a short time, I stopped and looked once again at the missile and the surrounding silo. The missile’s warhead, which contained the nuclear weapon, was just a few feet away from me at that point. I recall thinking how innocuous that simple warhead appeared to be at that moment. Furthermore, the maintenance team that was working at the site that particular night had removed the “launch door” that normally covered the large opening to the silo through which the missile would have passed if it had been launched. As I looked up through that opening, the tip of the missile stood stark against the black night sky—and the brilliant stars in the heavens above. I thought of times as a boy when I would stand with my maternal grandmother on a hillside outside her house in southern Indiana observing the night sky. On such occasions she taught me the names of the constellations, as well as the opening words from the 19th Psalm: “The heavens declare the glory of God...” I thought, as I looked at that missile warhead silhouetted against the night sky, “What a dichotomy—the heavens declare the glory of God while this warhead declares the folly of humankind.”

I never looked at the night sky in quite the same way again. As Mark Twain expressed it regarding the change in his perspectives about the Mississippi River after becoming a river boat pilot, my viewpoint regarding the heavens—and humanity—had been altered in irreversible ways by one brief moment in time on a winter’s night in a Wyoming missile silo.

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Now we know what is trivia and what is real...
—Terry and Renny Russell from On the Loose (1967)

I occasionally revisit that photograph of the young man playing his guitar on the Pacific Ocean coastline. I have asked myself many times what it is about that man, or that picture, that attracts me even now. There are lots of things, I suppose, but I think that many of them have to do with my inner desire for authenticity. That photo depicts, for me, an “authentic moment”—one man alone with nature and creating music from the heart. It represents elements of authenticity that I desire to express in and through my life as I engage the environment and my surroundings—and as I relate to others and myself.

About 20 years ago I created a teaching motto to help guide me in my academic work. The motto is: Be prepared, be concerned, and be myself. There it is again—my aspirations for authenticity. Perhaps that is it. That is my imperishable attitude that traces to those long ago, very different Air Force times for me. Perhaps the one imperishable attitude, above all others, that has informed my practice as a teacher and learner has been my desire to recognize and hold fast to that which is genuine—to that which is “real.”

This desire expresses itself in my bringing authentic examples and discussions into the classroom through the use of case studies. It expresses itself in my efforts to introduce students to the world through travel-study, internships, and field-based courses. It expresses itself in my wanting to give examinations that test a student’s understanding, not only a student’s memory. It expresses itself in my desire to bring my whole self into my teaching, not just my brain. And it expresses itself, too, in my efforts to help students recognize and develop their imperishable attitudes, their “philosophies if you like,” their ways of “laying out the world and of planting ourselves in it”—their capacities to know “what is trivia and what is real.”

**SUMMARY**

In his excellent book on finding one’s “calling” as a teacher, Parker Palmer (2000) has advocated that academics must listen as their lives are “telling them” who they are. He states, “I must listen for the truths and values at the heart of my own identity...the standards by which I cannot help but live if I am living my own life.” In his earlier book, Palmer (1998) noted, “…if we want to grow as teachers—we must do something alien to academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives—risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract.”

Memoir writing is “risky stuff.” A memoir can be deeply personal, especially when it moves beyond a descriptive account of events and incidents to seeking to understand firmly held values, attitudes, and perspectives. And memoir writing must, of necessity, be selective. Chittister (2002) has written,
“Everything in life is important, but not everything is equally important at the same time. It’s not possible to tell one from the other unless we first know ourselves.” Most would agree that when it comes to teaching and learning, everything is not equally important. A key to discerning what really matters at any given moment is to know oneself and one’s core values, attitudes, and perspectives—and why one “owns” those. Writing a memoir—and especially a memoir of teaching—can be very helpful as a means to “first know yourself” and to thereby gain insight about how you have come to believe what you do about teaching.

But a memoir is more than that. It is paradoxically both individual and communal. A memoir is written to be shared with others. Palmer (1998) has written, “If I want to teach well, it is essential that I explore my inner terrain. But I can get lost in there, practicing self-delusion and running in self-serving circles. So I need the guidance that a community of collegial discourse provides…” From my experience with memoir writing about teaching and learning, I have found “collegial discourse” with fellow writers and readers to be essential. To approach the creation of a teaching memoir in the company of a particular writing partner can be extremely valuable.

Finally, memoir writing is a matter of “trust.” Hampl (1999) has written, “For the memoirist...the story seems already there, already accomplished and fully achieved in history...For the memoirist, the writing of the story is a matter of transcription.” Depending on how one defines “transcription,” Hampl’s statement might be a bit misleading. Writing a memoir is difficult and involves a myriad of decisions—what to include, what not to include, who to include, who not to include, and why does it matter. One cannot predict what aspects of one’s memoir story will relate to others—how one’s life and professional experience will “speak” to others. “Trust the process,” I sometimes say when colleagues tell me that they are lost in the detail and indecisions that inevitably come with writing a memoir. And through the process, both writer and reader will gain insights and understanding that can only come from telling—and making meaning of—one’s own story.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I express my deep appreciation to Dr. Kathleen O’Donovan, who co-facilitated the “Making Meaning of a Life in Teaching” Project with me at the University of Minnesota during the 2003–2004 academic year. Kathleen is a “kindred spirit” whose presence always assured that the Project had sensitivity, compassion, and humor. I also thank Dr. Linda Miller-Cleary for her “collegial discourse” as my writing partner during the development of my memoir of teaching. Her insightful responses to drafts were of much benefit to me during the memoir writing process.

REFERENCES


