

Self-Portrait; or, How to Drop a Plate of Spaghetti

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Unless you count my Dad getting a metallurgy degree because of the post-World War II GI bill,* I was the first member of my family to go to get a liberal arts education. Before I headed off to the second-choice college that accepted me, I knew I was interested in the humanities, especially history and literature. I knew this because I was shy except when it came to reading and talking about reading. I felt ashamed that I felt safer and saner in story-worlds than in what everyone else seemed to take to be the “real” and “serious” world. (Some things don’t change.) Only later did I learn of Mark Twain’s quip that “the difference between fiction and real life is that fiction has to make sense.”

*which funded higher education for a generation of white males while others were excluded; “progressive” legislation in the late 1940s only progressed so far.

If your experience is anything like mine, you’ll discover that most jobs and volunteer work give you as valuable an education as the fancy one you pay for. Nerd revelation #1: one of my summer jobs to earn \$ saving for college was selling ice cream in suburban subdivisions from one of those ice cream trucks with maddeningly repetitive tunes. One day a little girl asked me to accept sea shells as payment for her ice cream. I was so charmed I said yes. I got a fair amount of reading done that summer because the proper m.o. was to park the truck and have the neighborhood show up in waves. In between sales there was plenty of wait time. Blocking out the tinny music and parked in a suburban cul de sac (creepy name!), I read Mark Twain’s *Letters from the Earth* in tiny bits and pieces.

Later, in college, I had a variety of other jobs at school and in summer. I became an apprentice dishwasher, eventually being promoted to a journeyman Hobart machine operator. I fooled everyone and passed as a groundskeeper, gardener, painter, general repairman, and gofer in Maine. And one memorable summer I made the rounds as a night-watchman at a mostly empty and spooky tuberculosis sanitarium near my home town in Illinois. (It’s now converted into a busy rehab center for opioid addicts and I’m sure is still haunted.) Nerd reveal #2: two of those jobs gave me hours “free” to read. Hello, Henry James, Jane Austen, Will Shakespeare, James Baldwin (*A Fire Next Time*), and Oscar Wilde, plus some failed experiments trying to enjoy the work of sf writer Andre Norton. Wish somebody had told me about Ursula Le Guin back then; I discovered her only later.

While on leave from Swarthmore, as well as doing archival research and drafting articles and books I’ve done Sierra Club-organized hiking trail repair. Hello Guadalupe Mountains National Park, east of El Paso, Texas. There I learned to add a chopped-up poblano pepper to my scrambled eggs. Got some reading done there too, in a tent, before quickly falling asleep. Trail building and repair is not unlike writing good sentences (see Gary Snyder’s poem “Rip Rap”). But with trails at the end of the day it is easy to know if you’ve done good work or not. With writing, not so much.

Back to the 1970s. (Yeah, I’m old.) I applied to colleges with strong arts, music, and literature programs. Oberlin opened their door. Not sure why they did, because I sent them an application essay that I was sure had to be impassioned and profound because it was written almost entirely in Faulknerian run-on sentences. Once there, I took lots of literature courses, of course, but my favorite other classes were in history, philosophy, and art history and studio art. If film and media courses had existed then I would have taken them too. A lit geek needs to roam widely and wildly.

Two fond memories from those undergrad years that I will drag out of the Memory Vault in case they're useful, or at least amusing. Oberlin has a Music Conservatory. I got a whole free music education by going to weekly student recitals and other concerts. I discovered that there was lots of great music before Bach, and that 20th century music was really cool and varied. I discovered post-'50s jazz in others' dorm rooms. And all kinds of other music too. I grew big ears and realized I'd been walking around deaf most of my life. Grew a new set of eyes too: thank you to all my art teachers.

Then there was the Clown Workshop. It was offered for free by the great Bill Irwin. It turns out it's *hard* balancing a plate of spaghetti on your upturned elbow (the crook of your arm) while walking around with it. It's harder still suddenly to drop the elbow on purpose and catch the plate (but not the spaghetti) before it hits the floor. Keeping the required comic's deadpan face during all this also was not easy. Learning how to do a Clown Stroll while wearing those long, oversize clown shoes was a challenge too. But putting on a clown nose—that I did on the very first try. Life Skills 101: learn to laugh at yourself.

At Oberlin I loved a half dozen teachers deeply; they radically changed my understanding of the life of the mind. So despite the job situation, which was bad in the 1970s but not yet insane, I decided to try to see if I could become a university or college teacher. I figured that if that didn't work, I could always try for jobs in marketing, advertising, journalism, or editing and translating. Or if they didn't work out, I could be a waiter in a spaghetti house. I was scared the teaching gig wouldn't work out. But I was also scared I might regret it for the rest of my life if I *didn't* try to get the job of my dreams.

In Charlottesville I was in grad school at the University of Virginia with our current President, Val Smith. We endured a Victorian literature seminar together, believe it or not. UVa has huge and rich Faulkner archives; but while there I discovered U.S. Southern studies was much broader than Faulkner. I also explored deeply for the first time early colonial literature, Native American studies, historical cultural history, and interdisciplinary studies. I heard Elizabeth Bishop read her poems in a hushed voice in Jefferson's Rotunda. She was clearly terrified by the setting and the crowd; seeing that broke my heart. She was also sick; she had less than a year to live. But my god! her poems were beautiful.

My first classes to teach at UVa were Rhetoric and Composition courses—which I'd never taken. (I learned to write decently by reading literature and literary criticism; sports writing; and *Mad Magazine*, which taught me how fun irony and marginalia were.) Fortunately, we got help creating our first Rhet/Comp syllabus and lesson plans. I later was able to move to teaching literature, and realized that English Lit grad school, like med school and law school, has its own initiation rituals.

My unoriginal advice: statistically, humanities majors compete well and get a wide variety of jobs because if you work hard at it* you'll leave here with strong verbal and communication skills, plus good leadership and people skills. You'll know how to handle complex problem-solving. And you should be able to speak in paragraphs when needed. Not many people can, you know. Use summer jobs and volunteer work to explore different possibilities that might interest you for long-term work, not just to save \$ for the future. It was some tutoring and day-care center work that I took on a whim during my college years that showed me how scary & fun teaching could be.

*that's the catch

At Swarthmore go as deeply as possible into the field or two that you most love (including perhaps newly discovered interdisciplinary courses). Explore new areas that weren't taught in your high school—including, if you're a humanities person, music and dance and theater and art and film and media studies and philosophy (maybe). Be close to fluent in at least two languages if you can.

All this will help you learn what to live for, not just how to earn a living. And, oh yes, never forget that we all carry around a secret clown nose in one of our pockets.