

Transcending

Memoir

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I once read that we need to bring ourselves to our teaching...ah the challenge...and the opportunity. What I bring to teaching resonates from the core of my being...the synthesis of 'life-marks'---significant mileposts in my life, my ancestry. My being seems to emanate from living 'outside the box.' Not that I was aware of that, but emerged.

Ever since I can remember, I felt the safety...and limitations of a box. Even in the warm safety of my crib as an infant, I rattled my confining box of a crib, jolting my parents awake at 4:30 a.m. daily for breakfast. I can recall my highly creative papa (the 14th of 13 children!), who modeled living 'outside the box'...who, just for our experience, occasionally took his incredibly young daughters to work with him at the weather bureau, long before 'take-your daughter-to-work-week' came into custom. I recall pouring over weather maps and eventually napping in a comfy box under his desk.

My own daughter once asked what I remember most about being a kid. I shared with her my love for being outside...all those family vacations throughout the United States, cramming all seven of us into our '51 Dodge and five-man tent; the long-lost art of playing marbles; at least 20 neighborhood kids flying kites together in the same yard; wonderful fishing jaunts to our favorite fishing hole; camping in the barnyard beside the serene 'Pine Tree Hole'...or sometimes snuggled in a tiny, remote cabin; ice-skating the winter away, warming up by the pot-belly stove, radiating a wonderful campfire smell and a not-so-wonderful smell of burnt mittens also filling the air. Climbing to the rooftop during a tornado, so papa could help us identify and analyze the wall cloud and cumulus nimbus cloud strata...tornado sirens blaring all the while...neighbors huddled in their basements. Celebrating any John Phillip Sousa song that blared on the radio was our cue to march around the outside of the house, in pajamas or whatever we were wearing at the time! For the most part, my papa shared his love of living simply, sense of adventure, his essence and spirit, nourishing my soul and being...a worthy, novel preparation for teaching.

These idyllic remembrances however, could not quell the downside. Within the confines of safety and warmth, unintentional and unspoken learning happens. The memories of chronic

teasing for being scrawny...the runt of the litter...the sad growing awareness of life's pecking order. The slow, sad realization that some feelings were okay to show, while others---the tears, fears, sadness, and other vulnerabilities that connect us all were deemed 'wimpy' and often ridiculed or ignored...considered weak. An unspoken rule. An unopened box. No one sat me down to say 'this is how we think or feel about this or that; but rather a learning from watching supposed 'normal' behavior.

My parents were not cruel...bottom line, they were wonderful. They brought stability, warmth, laughter, creativity, and a love for living simply to my life. Mama consciously chose to raise us away from physical abuse and alcoholism that injured, traumatized her throughout her growing years. And my papa shared his love of living simply, sense of adventure, his essence and spirit, nourishing my soul and being. Living 'outside the box' for their time.

The kernels of my being I trace to my ancestry. From the age of three, my papa, raised by his grandparents with their 13 kids, became their 14th child, after losing his single-parent mama to 'consumption' (Tuberculosis). Although he experienced much happiness being raised by his grandparents--surrounded by aunts and uncles, no one could soothe his heart at the loss of his mama. I heard stories about him wandering the streets of his small town, crying for his mama. Reminding the townspeople of a current crybaby comic character, 'snookums, his grief was seen as humorous to others, rather than reaching out to comfort a suffering soul. Sadly his nickname, first 'snookums' and eventually shortened to 'Nook,' originated from these dark days in his early years, remaining with him lifelong.

Surrounded by his surrogate siblings, his childhood at times, paralleled Tom Sawyer's charmed experiences and antics---from digging under the local school to carve out a working photo lab and archery practice area to brandishing the fine art of fly fishing----a sincere love of life's simple pleasures becoming a part of his legacy.

Although his dark days lightened and he had grown rich in experience, adventure, and creativity, his emotional landscape remained in ways too complex for this young spirit; thus beginning an unspoken legacy passed down through the generations. Painful feelings hibernated deep inside, hidden from the surface. Extremely poor, he knew the nights when not to ask about dinner. There was simply no food. He managed on rhubarb from a nearby yard.

Papa's emotional terrain, seemingly smooth on the outside, hid the pain of immense loss just below the surface. In his young adulthood, he climbed out of the wreckage of a fatal plane crash just seconds before the plane exploded, killing most on board, including his best friend. His hard lessons of loss from his early childhood now set in motion the pattern of 'unspoken rules,' squelching the grief and pain of loss. Two generations later, when my son was born with a lethal form of liver cancer, papa would help in any way he could, but was emotionally unable to set foot in the hospital, where I lived with Tug for a year.

Feeling invisible or unimportant may not happen in one instance, but rather in the daily, ongoing, interaction and unspoken messages from those in our lives. In my early years, I learned the dance of interaction from my parents, my siblings, and eventually my peers. Just as my papa couldn't shake his lifelong reputation as crybaby 'snookums', this served as a forewarning to me. As the scrawny 'runt of the litter,' I was pegged early on as the sickly, weak, dimly witted one...for life....no matter what. Given the deep and unresolved grief dwelling deep within my parents, we lived together, sharing warmth and much laughter...with no place/space to feel, talk about, or process unpleasant feelings or vulnerabilities like sadness, rejection, anger, insecurities, doubt or fear, etc.

I cried alone in pain and anger when my fifth grade teacher gave me a failing grade for writing a poem that was too good to have been written by me---and had to have been copied from somewhere else. I cried alone, hurt and angry from the cruel taunts of others for my supposed scrawny, weak and dim witted persona. I cried alone when I barely escaped a sexual assault in high school and again, when no one listened.

Pegged early in life with a label that did not define me, I journeyed in my young adulthood to a much broader understanding, fueled to explore life's emotional terrains in my studies, my eventual focus in educational psychology. The birth of my second child, my son Tug, brought to the forefront the tremendous challenge of these unfortunate early life lessons...and at last the opportunity to grow and mature beyond...transcend.

Tug, though seemingly healthy, was born with a lethal form of liver cancer and subsequently, a poor prognosis of surviving. Shortly after his birth, I too, became seriously ill, though not with cancer. I later learned that we both were likely poisoned by accidental, toxic exposure to a pesticide. I mourned the loss of my son's health and the loss of my own. I

mourned the sudden uprooting of my young daughter's happy-go-lucky childhood. I mourned my resignation from my new position as a professor to care for my young family. I mourned the failed attempt to heal my illness by surgery, later learning that a misdiagnosis, resulting in unnecessary surgery had permanently destroyed my balance and the loss of my ability to physically return to ordinary day-to-day living.

Slowly a turning point, though not before Tug hit rock bottom, with me close behind. The day before Thanksgiving in 1985, Tug had been home briefly for a short break from the hospital, when he was rushed back with a life-threatening complication. This happened moments before my own surgery to help bridge my journey back to health. As I went under anesthesia, I cried as I longed to be with my children, comfort them, and terrified that Tug might not survive. The surgeon and nurses cried with me. As I woke from my operation, I longed for my son, anxious to hear word and yet, dreading to hear word. Finally whispered in my ear the best words I have ever heard, "He's alive."

Ever so slowly, Tug's health began to improve, while mine remained at rock bottom....my broken, poisoned body frequently seemingly paralyzed. Little by little, I began to accept what the doctors said could not be changed. My sense of normal was vastly different from anyone else I knew. Only after truly growing through such painful loss and change did I accept and grow into a new way of being. It seems that, as I gradually accepted my limited reality, living outside the box changed it all.

Instead of focusing on the thousand things I could no longer do, I focused on the millions of things I could do. My emotional legacy began. Slowly twisting the unspoken rule. Feelings were shared and validated. It was okay for any of us to feel and talk about feeling scared, lonely, mad, hurt, insecure, right along with the pleasant feelings. I surrounded myself and my children with people who truly epitomized emotional support. We could rely on, guide, and support each other. These dear people became members of our family in every sense of the word.

As my children grew to school-age, and cancer no longer looming over us, I began to wonder about returning to teaching...to consider callings to teach in higher education. Very gingerly at first, teaching one class a year, then one each semester, eventually to teaching full

time. The most stressful, utterly exhausting days in academia did not come close to even one of the immensely trying days of the cancer years.

Returning to teaching felt like a warm reunion with a cherished friend. My passion for teaching had grown, and I discovered that likewise, my teaching had grown. As Parker Palmer so aptly articulated the need for us to bring ourselves to our teaching, I now brought myself fully to my teaching.

Still focused on teaching content, I also focused just as much on the needs of my students. I brought and shared my vulnerabilities, along side my experience and expertise. I looked deeply into my students as never before, encouraging and challenging them, with all that I taught, to apply themselves with deep purpose. Everything I taught in class connected to deep purpose. Each apparently trivial assignment connected to deep purpose. Our classroom discussions became richer. My classes gelled, students connecting with one another, forming learning communities. A sense of trust and unconditional acceptance permeated my classes...it was okay to feel and share the pleasant and the not-so-pleasant thoughts, feelings, values, issues, controversies. A little discomfort I now experienced as healthy...a cognitive dissonance, so to speak, the seed of value growth, attitudinal change, transformation. Previously dreaded 'what if' scenarios were readily shared, pondered, feared, processed, analyzed, discussed and ultimately valued. Teaching 'simply' has nothing to do with simplistic or shallow thinking or blinding ourselves to the world's complexity. Living simply, teaching simply has everything to do with knowing that we can simplify ourselves. Never before, with all my strengths and limitations had I felt so comfortable living, teaching 'outside the box.'

Fortified by years of tears, covert and overt ridicule, lack of validation, and series of losses, I grew to sense suffering in others. Red flags raised in my heart when I sensed a student or colleague in distress. Students, often filled with motivation and capability, can be derailed in their educational career with unforeseen accidents, traumas and losses. Rather than as a martyr or rescuer, I now gently approached and empathized with the other, supporting and guiding many students to a safe next step. Fully aware of my own limitations, I sought and connected with those that would support and guide me in new terrain; it was okay to ask for help in order to provide help. A wonderful counselor guided me to help a student of my concern, who indeed had become suicidal. I sought the direction of a capable mediator who helped me guide a student that had experienced significant injustice.

My anger, too, forged a path of meaning and purpose. Denying anger for too many years, I now let myself feel, reflect, process and put to constructive use my anger. Angry from failing because, long ago, my poem was ‘too good to be original,’ I now shared with my students the importance of academic integrity, and to fully acknowledge the immense strengths each student brings to the table. My anger from an unnecessary surgery and subsequent disability forged a path to focus on the absolute necessities in both class and life. And when I felt the anger from my adult siblings pressuring, thrusting our mother from her home, fearing her failing health, I directed my anger into advocating for her; advocacy against exploitation, working for justice and equity in eldercare. My students too, are continually encouraged to gently confront constructively the issues they encounter and grapple with in their classes and lives. We readily apply this in my classes by actively acknowledging and fully engaging differences and/or conflicts via healthy, respectful debates, lively discussions, and especially constructive controversies.

And then there is all the wonderful foolishness...the fun of teaching outside the box. Bringing those cherished times and lessons from my life into the classroom. My favorite mistake took place years ago when my doctoral students were on a technological ‘scavenger hunt’ so to speak. Instead of finding a valuable, educational virtual site online, we innocently stumbled into and got stuck in a pornography site! Even this tremendously embarrassing faux pas led to not only a repertoire of novel, productive strategies to fully engage students, but also state and national presentations, guiding other professors to bring the power of play to increase the effectiveness of their teaching and learning.

Maybe my creativity and supposed foolishness won’t result in finding my students on top of a house (or school building!) during a tornado, but I can use motivating and unforgettable cutting edge teaching and learning strategies in the classroom that expedite mastery and meaningful learning. Teaching critical competencies and knowledge for students to use meaningfully in their lives can be accomplished in a multitude of engaging ways. The more difficult the material to be taught, the more creativity, and seemingly foolish format, can help.

My children, Brynn and Tug, too thrived in ‘breaking the family cycle of emotional blunting,’ and grew to their young adulthood, embracing and sharing all of life’s offerings.

Brynn has since followed her passion of helping and counseling young children, while Tug pursues his burgeoning desire to solve the medical enigmas of HIV/Aids and cancer.

And so, I find it fitting to share a Franciscan blessing, I once heard, that seems to epitomize my journey, ultimately a legacy I feel privileged to live and pass on...transcending limitations.....dancing outside the box:

May you be blessed with . . . discomfort
at easy answers, half truths and superficial relationships
so that you will live deep in your heart.

May you be blessed with . . . anger
at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people and the earth
so that you will work for justice, equity and peace

May you be blessed with . . . tears
to shed for those who suffer so that you will reach out with your hands
to comfort them and change their pain into joy

And may you be blessed with the foolishness
to think that you can make a difference in the world
so that you will do the things which others say cannot be done.

Deb Wingert, 2007