

To the Hills of Old Kentuck': Musings About My Entry Into Teaching

A Fork in the Road

Much of my college career was overshadowed by my preoccupation about being drafted as a soldier in the Viet Nam War—the Iraq skirmish for my generation. Unlike most of my peers, I had a first-hand experience that gave me a deeper insight into the suffering and pain that contradicted the glorified advertisement encouraging young men to enlist in the Army. As a sophomore theatre/speech major at Kansas State Teacher College, I was cast in a unique production of the musical *Once Upon A Mattress* that was performed both for the audiences in Emporia but also as a USO Show entertaining the troops in Japan, Okinawa, Korea, and the Philippines. Needless-to-say, this was an eye-opener for a young man who had lived only in the Midwest and had very limited experiences and references beyond the prairie of Kansas further narrowed by a suburban upbringing.

To complement *Mattress*, our college troop was also required to prepare a variety show to be performed “only as the occasion warranted”—such as hospital wards or as entertainment for military dinners and ceremonies. What none of us had been prepared for was that the musical became secondary while performing in the numerous hospitals on the military bases became our main means of interacting with these boys and men. We were always ushered into a room by the chief administrator who would try to prepare us in his/her words for seeing some of the worst casualties of the war—realize a wounded soldier was only stabilized in Viet Nam before being transferred to a hospital outside of the combat zone.

In a very short period of time, we all became aware of the fact that there was an unfortunate similarity in all of these hospitals. It was numbing to be constantly confronted with young men our age missing appendages or in full body casts because they had been mistakenly disfigured by napalm or friendly fire. Although this did not catalyze the males in the troop to collectively go to Canada or burn our draft cards, it did leave an indelible mark on me. I

decided, as a result of that experience, that it was necessary to find a means to both be ethically responsible to my obligation as a citizen (my good Midwestern upbringing) while working the system so that I could avoid the misfortunes of so many of the youth we were asked to “cheer up.” I can only guess what it must have been like to have been on the other side of the mirror seeing someone that was whole, without the jaded pessimism that seemed to transform so many that lived that experience and nightmare.

On completion of my Bachelor’s degree, my status along with almost every senior in America was immediately changed from student deferment to 1A. For college graduates this meant basic Army boot camp immediately followed by commission officer training. The word on the street was that second lieutenants had to lead the charge and then hope they were not shot by the enemy or in some instances, from the back by the enlisted and drafted foot soldiers dubious about following a college-educated smart aleck into uncertain death.

The strategy I implored was twofold; first, to go through the basic induction procedures—what were my choices? Second, I immediately appealed my reclassification. When I was brought before the draft board—a stern group of ultra-conservative middle age men and women—I was asked the nature of my request. With an equally stern and stony face—after all, part of my education was as an actor--I explained to them that, “I was in theatre and I thought with this terrible war in Viet Nam what the country needed was all the entertainment it could get and not another soldier.” Of course, my logic and dark humor was unceremoniously dismissed followed by a letter that immediately reassigning me to 1A status but I had bought valuable time allowing me to register for a fall semester in graduate school and a very important respite from the draft.

During that summer of uncertainty, I also pre-enlisted in the Air Force passing both the flight and navigation exams. This was followed by a grueling physical that prodded and explored more orifices than I thought existed in the human. My USO experience helped me understand that the Air Force and Navy had the best of everything—billets, food, and officer

clubs. So, if I had to participate in a war that still is not understood to this day, it seemed I had covered all of my bases—or at least, as far as was humanly possible for a boy from Kansas.

One wrinkle that I was unprepared for was the reinstatement of the first draft lottery since the Korean War. In the course of six months (June to December 1969), my life had precariously teetered between student to soldier back then back to student. I was on a course to enlist in the Air Force after the first of the year. And totally unexpected to all, I had met the love of my life and within two weeks had decided to propose with an impending Christmas wedding.

Ironically in late November and independent of my planning and scheming, my fate and future was in the hands of the gods and the guy randomly drawing capsules from a wire drum. With several of my friends suitably braced with a liberal supply of cheap bourbon, we watched in black and white as birthdates were unfurled from the small capsules, read to the television audience and then ceremoniously posted on a board. As the evening progressed two things simultaneously occurred, we were becoming less eligible for international travel of someone else's choosing and we were all becoming increasingly more inebriated.

I have always been unlucky in prize drawings, but on that cold November night, I was so incredibly fortunate. For with a high draft number of 348, it became slowly apparent to me through the fog of the booze that this chapter of my life and all the ensuing uncertainty was finally over. I politely turned down the opportunity to report to Lackland Air Force Base and began to prepare for the life and challenges ahead.

There's Gold in Them Thar' Hills!

Having survived the Viet Nam scare and successfully dodging my military obligation, I turned my life and attention to getting that first job—one that would validate my education and allow me to finally put into practice all of my preconceptions about how it should and

could be done in the classroom. Although the modeling from my instructors more than prepared me for a career as an academic, I was confident that I would improve on the performance of my professors—a narcissistic response more accredited to my youth than to any dissatisfaction with my education.

My first entry into the job market occurred at a regional Speech Communication Association at the Palmer House in Chicago. This venue proved to be a wonderful forum “to sell myself”—something that I have been doing ever since. At that time, speech and theatre were interconnected and cooperative disciplines. Theatre was a natural outgrowth of oral interpretation that emerged from the long-standing tradition of classical rhetoric—one of the foundation blocks in the academic model of a well-rounded student.¹

During those interviews in Chicago, I got to reaffirm that my education was both substantive and competitive as more than one interviewer stated my portfolio of theatre designs and sketches seemed to reflect a variety of experiences that far exceeded my age. Fred Voigt, Chairman of the Communications Division from Morehead State University in Kentucky [as I learned later, when I came to Minnesota, the other Moorhead] and I hit it off immediately. Since the interviews were in one of the elegant ballrooms without even a modest attempt at privacy, I constantly glared with restrained contempt every time Dr. Voigt was in conversation with anyone that looked remotely like they could be interested in “my” job. Throughout the three-day conference, we found ways of intersecting with each other to

¹ To this day, there is still an old photograph, institutionally framed, that hangs in the conference room of the Department of Speech Communication. This time capsule was taken on the steps of Jones Hall of the combined faculty from the long-standing Department of Speech, Theatre, and Hearing Disorders at this University. Judging from the “youthful” appearance of some of my earliest colleagues—all “nattily” dressed in wide-lapelled tweed and individualized only by their choice of neckwear—that image must have been captured some time way before the amicable divorce of the disciplines in the early 70s. Although I was frequently reminded by selected members of the theatre faculty of the long, lost halcyon days when faculty didn’t wear jeans and only displayed “collegial civility fostered over lunch at The Campus Club,” there was never, to my recollection, a single reference or reflection of a past life when the department was—to use a current ‘buzz word’—interdisciplinary.

reaffirm that this was a good match. I also eagerly offered any piece of information as a way of sharpening my chances to make my application-- from a personal and, I am sure in retrospect, very jaded perspective--the clear choice. In my entry into the academic sphere, I had little opportunity to compare my skills with others so it was easy to convince myself that the competition was a “middling group of also-rans”—so much for youthful self-confidence. This would wane as I progressed through my career!

My efforts were quickly rewarded and I was invited for an on-campus interview. My new wife, Cheryl and I drove to Kentucky in a car I borrowed from my father, as our 12-year old Nova was suspect. From the beginning, this adventure seemed like it was meant to be as the flatness of Kansas and Missouri melted into the rocky hills and outcroppings that surround the Ohio River bluffs of southern Illinois. From Louisville, we followed the interstate circumventing the lush horse farms of Lexington and into the enchanted and densely wooded foothills of Appalachia. It had become immediately apparent that we “were not in Kansas anymore.”

As we drove into the community of Morehead, my wife and I were immediately struck by the disparity between two distinct worlds: the students and faculty of Morehead State University segregated in the high rise and modern “towers of learning” contrasted with the uneducated, indigenous Hill Jacks [their term, not mine] that lived in tar-paper shacks and trailers hidden in the numerous hollers that surrounded the community and the University. The campus was even lovelier than the self-promoting postcards cleverly composed so that the lush, indigenous trees and vegetations framed one world while obscuring the obvious. It was also apparent that this University had received a substantial amount of public funding probably in response to the rural location and poverty that was intermixed and juxtaposed throughout much of Eastern Kentucky.

Although I was confident in my own ability to secure the job, what I was unprepared for was the conservative attitudes and rituals of the South that slowly permeated and complicated

what I assumed was a linear process. This became most apparent when it was explained to me that “University policy” stipulated that I was to pay for the entire interview expense up front—that seemed appropriate. However, I was further informed that only if I was offered a job on the faculty and accepted the offer would the institution compensate me for money I had to borrow and scrape together. With emerging clarity, I was struck by the notion that there was a larger difference between Kentucky and Kansas than just topography.

When I arrived for the onsite interview, everyone I met verified that my self-assessment of preparation for the job was correct; however, it was repeatedly explained to me that the ultimate decision and approval had to come from the University President, Adron Doran. The mere mention of his name by faculty and students brought both a sense of awe and fear along with a strange uneasy feeling from me as almost half of the new buildings on campus were emblazoned with either his name or his wife’s--Mignon. In my discussion with the students, I pressed for an explanation as to why so much of the campus was named for a living President and his wife. Their joking response seasoned with a little Hill-Jack sarcasm was “that the University had a Doran complex.”

They also explained to me that the drama program was not in the President’s favor as he looked at theatre students as a “bunch of weirdoes and homosexuals.” It was more obvious that the students, many who felt alienated and orphaned by the institution and system, were also looking for someone that would care for their needs while giving them an education. The immediate task was to teach the students based on the modeling that was such a part of my recent education while developing a strategy to convince the administration of the validity of theatre as an art form and a necessary player in the larger academic community.

Repeatedly, I was told that the state of Kentucky rewarded distinguished politicians with appointments to the regional university system and that Adron Doran had been a powerful Speaker of the House and the presidency of this institution of 6000 students was one of the

spoils of political wars. This filled me with an anxious anticipation and a fuller understanding that this process had a lot more intricacies than just being “the best person for the job.”

On entering Dr. Doran’s contemporary, palatial office overlooking the major artery of campus, it was obvious that this experience would be very different than what I anticipated or was told would occur. We were not alone but Dr. Doran (said in a reverential voice) was surrounded by other administrators all wearing bowties in imitation of the President. I later learned that the majority of the upper-level administrators were also members of the same Church of Christ where Dr. Doran served as Reverend Doran on Tuesday nights—this finally led to the full understanding of the dual aura that surrounded the mere mention of his name. It immediately occurred to me that the bowtie was probably a deeper symbol requiring further interpretation as my only real experience with bowties worn as a dress uniform were by high-school industrial arts teachers--constantly concerned with not “getting caught up in their work.”

As I entered, Dr. Doran was engaged in dispatching some “important” piece of business and it was obvious that I was a very small part of a larger agenda and probably some further annoyance in what was, I am sure, already a “very taxing day.” What was equally disconcerting about the dynamics of this entourage was the conversation from selected deans and vice presidents as they constantly bantered about the length of students’ skirts as they passed on the sidewalk directly below the office. One administrator quipped that he had observed a coed bending over while walking to the Hill—reference to both the Capital in Washington and the Administration building in Morehead-- and that “her skirt was so short that you could see the foot prints on the moon.”

Other commented about the student uprising and tragedy at Kent State declaring that “that type of shenanigans needs to stay north of the Ohio River”—an obvious reference to the fact that south of the Mason-Dixie line, the world was “ordered and as it should be.” One bowtie immediately interjected that the local Hill Jacks, who all owned hunting rifles and coon dogs,

would take care of any “problems” here. He also immediately stated the obvious--“that Blacks better be careful walking down Main Street.” I had a sinking feeling and clearer understanding that it was one of two ways at Morehead, either “their way or the highway”—this proved to be very prophetic. Further evidence verified my intuitive reaction to a most bizarre collection of “inbred, old-white males.”

The first time I was acknowledge, Dr. Doran raised his head slightly and glared at me above his split reading spectacles. I immediately felt shriveled to no more than six-inches tall; more a part of the pattern on his rug than “his next big hire.” He immediately launched into the business at hand. “Young man”—an auspicious start by stating the obvious—“Two years ago, we hired Larry Roof to do this job and he did not work out. So we got rid of him!” “And, the year before that we hired Marvin Phillips, and he didn’t work out.” “So, if you don’t work out, you know what is going to happen to you!” That ended the conversation; I never said a word except that I would do my best. I was then promptly escorted out of the inner-sanctum in full scrutiny of the assembled puppet regime to meet an eager and friendly Dr. Voigt who could immediately see that I had both survived the strangeness of Kentucky [I eventually learned that conservative is ignorance spelled backwards] and the “Come-to-Jesus Meeting.”

I later discovered that it was common practice for Dr. Doran to meet a faculty member that he was not pleased with on campus and declare, “Well Mr. Faculty member, there is a bus going east and a bus going west, I suggest you be on one before next year.” [For clarity, the campus and community was platted in an east-west holler and there was no way you could go directly north or south without an arduous climb up some difficult terrain.] It also became clear that no matter what you tried to accomplish there was always going to be a certain amount of unsolicited scrutiny that could lead you to a bus going east or west. It became painfully apparent that I would have to mind my Ps and Qs.

All of this did not deter me from what I felt, then and now, was a wonderful place to start my academic career. I sensed that the students, many representing the first generation from their family to go to college, were excited at the prospects of having someone who was willing to help them realize their potential—albeit in an art form that was for many as foreign as indoor plumbing. I also knew that my ability to navigate difficult situations and people would put me in good stead with the craziness that became life in “Old Kentuck’.” Fortunately, the past history in the Morehead “drammer” program had been so miserable that there was only one way to go—a point articulated by Dr. Voigt in my first interview. What was equally helpful was that I was given space to develop in my teaching bringing skills that I had only observed and critiqued as a student to a level of maturity that made me anxious to expand my opportunities and experiences into a larger forum. This necessitated a change leading to the job at the University of Minnesota.

A little postscript is necessary. When Cheryl, my wife, and I were somewhat assured that we were going to be loading up in a four by eight foot U-Haul all of our “worldly possessions” [I couldn’t get my socks and underwear in that little space anymore] and travel to the hills, we were asked to make application for the one real shortage in Morehead—a suitable place to live. Our venture into the housing office clearly indicated that the University had made appropriate allowances for this need, as there were many duplexes and apartments available to faculty. As luck would have it, there was only one trailer² hidden in the scrub foliage at the bottom of the dam of the campus lake—you guessed it, it was to be ours and we were instantly transformed into Kansas Hill Jacks!

² Trailers bring up a dual connotation depending on your regional bearings. For adventure, we use to go on weekends to Mount Sterling occasionally passing what was claimed as the largest trailer (excuse me, mobile or manufactured homes) park in those parts. It was some of the worst, over-the-top interior designing that I have ever witnessed. However, it is amazing what you can disguise with brightly colored fake fur, ball fringe, and cheap crystal wall sconces. To a Kansan, a trailer was just that—a tornado magnet!

