

# Coffee Spoons or Backhoes? Humanistic Journeys in Self-Empowerment- A Retrospective

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## Perspective on Freedom and Inquiry

One of the most quotable lines in T.S. Eliot's writing appears in the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" when the "hero" says, "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." In his own inimitable way, Eliot might well have supplemented the metaphor with yet another, from Thoreau, who observed that most persons live lives of "quiet desperation."

Measuring my own life work against such yardsticks, I conclude that I've more often used a backhoe than a coffee spoon. No doubt we use the latter instrument to carry out the garbage, pay our bills, encounter bureaucratic administrivia and clean our teeth-and, sometimes we do, indeed, drown in coffee-spoon depth rather than work with larger implements to "move life" from day to day.

With 20/20 hindsight employing coffee-spoon and backhoe metaphors as measures: during seventeen years I taught in traditional contexts (at Bates, Hofstra, Ohio University, Athens College [Greece], etc.), I more often used the trivial measure. While I taught with enthusiasm and usually identified with "my" learners' frontiers, there was probably a narrowness to the process although I've received hundreds of letters from former students that might contradict that observation. During that early period I assumed that to expose students/learners to knowledge, the arts, philosophical methods, etc., especially in the context of liberal arts programs, was, indeed, to liberalize human perception and action. I assumed that "teaching" history was, to paraphrase George Santayana, a means of assisting adults in avoiding mistakes of the past. And

during the latter part of those seventeen years I assumed that exposing learners to alternative methodologies and the critical thinking demanded by each would assist them in becoming informed and productive citizens. Indeed, I thought I was mixing the best of the idealistic and pragmatic traditions. Maybe so, maybe not so.? Probably one would have to interview the several thousand learners whom I "taught" during that period to learn whether or not my assumptions developed into hard realities. 1 But enough of the first third of my teaching career.

During the last two-thirds, I have drawn from the humanistic tradition. Not in the narrow literary sense, nor within Sidney Hook's pragmatic world view-but in a wider terrain, one where the backhoe is a more apt metaphor. As suggested by my book on the topic, *Person-Centered Graduate Education*<sup>2</sup>, I have been a major participant in assisting with the development of several graduate schools but especially Antioch-Putney (now Antioch|New England), that of the Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities (now Union Institute), Walden University and the newly emerging Graduate School of America in Minneapolis. While I have frequently been perceived as a "founding father" of the Union, nobody has openly disputed my preferred claim to be "~ founding mother!" In that role I have felt comfortable nurturing learners, exercising my critical faculties as a "jester," and striving to extend the frontiers wherein learners could be "free" to explore in ways they rarely imagined while in traditional educational contexts. In the backhoe tradition, I once expressed regret that I had only forty years to devote to the Union in the decade of the Seventies. At their best the learning-at-a-distance/universitywithout-walls models provide structures which open rather than close opportunities while making heavy demands upon all involved in the process.

Briefly speaking, these programs, whether undergraduate or graduate, encourage learners to participate in the choice of methodologies for discovery in approaching topics they wish to study, choose the committees for facilitating learning, participate in

determining the confluence of hands-on and intellectual experience, in short exercise freedom of inquiry in a much more developmental mode than that which most traditional institutions provide. In fact, such evolutionary activity frequently becomes revolutionary when learners realize that they have gained self-empowerment to do that which they had never imagined possible. I have personally seen relatively passive persons "break out" to write fiction, poetry, proposals for action projects; I have encouraged and assisted learners in the construction of institutions which had seemed only remotely possible prior to their entering the programs...a school, a social agency, a clinic, etc.

In many ways, the work-study aspects of such programs have led to learning of which John Dewey would have been proud. By requiring an "internship," more broadly defined than the typical clinical type, learners do, indeed, learn to appreciate and combine the cognitive and experiential modes of being. Some internships have consisted of persons turning their own jobs upside down in order to utilize phenomenological methods and insights for new perspectives. In others, individuals who wanted to "try on" a new profession or consider mid-life transitions have achieved a real "feel" for the increasingly accepted fact that today's forward-looking citizens must prepare for five to ten career changes in the course of a lifetime. Still other learners have used the "mentor" approach to an internship, returning in a sense to the "apprenticeship" model; I have known persons to use poets, lawyers, university administrators, corporate officers and other professionals in such contexts. In short, universities without walls, at their best, extend the frontiers on which learners may promote and enjoy freedom of inquiry.

That there is a flip side to these models, one cannot deny. Such confluent educational models are not for everybody; if a potential enrollee, for whatever reason, cannot tolerate ambiguity, live with uncertainty, economic risk and self-motivation, then, indeed, this is not for her or him. As I once observed in *Free Inquiry*, "Freedom is Scary."<sup>3</sup> Too, I have seen divorce result when one

spouse could not "buy into" another's new-found freedom, whether in the name of "feminism," the gay revolution or radical self-empowerment. And, of course, there have been many attempts to "rip off" institutions when would-be learners found devious routes through these more complex methods of developing learning portfolios, tallying "credits," and "using" all-too-friendly adjunct professors. Yet, few persons in higher education seem to understand the essential intellectual bankruptcy in which traditional institutions construct transcripts (which are based upon an enormous number of assumptions about institutional integrity but "tell" little).

Ironically, the effort to monitor evaluative processes as well as seek accreditation tend to lead nontraditional institutions toward hardening of the arteries. I know of no institution which has avoided that malady. As an old friend and former colleague once observed, the best way to kill an idea is to institutionalize it. Understandably enough, at the outset of birthing such organizations both learners-in-process as well as those "in charge" tend to become anxious if one speaks of devising means toward constant renewal via self-destruction. The Catch 22 QI "wanting one's cake and having it, too" syndromes raise their ugly heads, hence guaranteeing the diminishing of freedom of inquiry. In order to quantify, hence stretch toward mathematical certainty, qualitative approaches to learning can be denigrated. Also faculty "educated/trained" in a particular discipline may be inclined to "lay a trip" on an excited learner as in traditional programs.

In short, Qf course there are landmines, but that is a risk which goes with the process. In my judgment one needs backhoes full of trust and courage. One must believe in freedom of inquiry and the enormous developmental potential of humans involved in such learning modes. When comparing the result of "teaching" some 10,000 students during a forty-year period while serving as resource and catalyst on more than 500 graduate committees dedicated to extending freedom of inquiry into vast constellations of mind and universe, the latter has been much more difficult but in-

finitely more exciting; also, I believe, more creative. In many ways, those engaging in such learning processes must be vocal about their newfound freedom to inquire. As Bertrand Russell once advised a student, "Be isolated, be ignored, be attacked, be in doubt, be frightened, but do not be silenced."<sup>4</sup> I continue to use my trusty backhoe to dig on those frontiers while keeping my coffee spoon handy!

### **Humanism As Process...**

All the above is "fine" as generalization. But getting down to the proverbial "nitty-gritty" complements simple intellectualizing. And it's into that "nitty-gritty" that I now plunge.

Since encountering Carl Rogers' life work<sup>5</sup>, also educating myself in a variety of psychological and psychotherapeutic modes, I have been increasingly convinced that most people have a story to tell IF there are those who will listen. Also I have been impressed by the way in which individuals, priming their own pumps via a variety of modes, produce more self-confidence, more creative ventures, more productive human interaction and live more productive lives than vice versa. With 20/20 hindsight, I believe I had been searching for half a lifetime to reinforce my own feelings about students/learners over the course of my years in traditional settings. Perhaps it was both intuitive and logical to have reached this conclusion via spending thousands of hours in small group discussions with "my" students, working with them developing and maintaining the Appalachian and Buckeye Trails, serving as trainer and ankle-taper during eleven football seasons, experiencing human growth and self-confidence evolving from hundreds-upon-hundreds of individual academic conferences.

The flip side of the coin found me increasingly skeptical about some of the operative assumptions encountered in traditional settings. The lecture system might be successful in transferring my notes into students' notebooks, without passing through the minds of any of us.<sup>6</sup> Both research results in general and my specific experience told me that it was a Byzantine modality for learning, one

used by the majority of professors in American colleges and universities. When I awoke one Sunday morning to learn that a student in my "Citizenship in the Modern World" class (he sat in the front row) was arrested by the Athens, Ohio, police and FBI for putting steel water pipes on the B & O railroad tracks running through the Ohio University campus, the efficacy of my traditional teaching modes became increasingly dubious! When the average size of my classes increased from sixty to ninety and I could not even "take in" all students in those sections, even with my first-rate peripheral vision, I argued vociferously with those who said that one could teach fifty as easily as five, 500 as easily as fifty. When the president of the school used this as a rationale for near-open and unlimited enrollment, I responded at a public meeting, "It all depends upon what one is trying to DO!" Not long after, finding an opportunity to move into a Mark Hopkins relationship with graduate students at Antioch, I abandoned tenure for an uncertain future and the opportunity to sit on the other end of the proverbial log to work with definitive individuals rather than amorphous masses.<sup>7</sup>

That was a life-changing move. While I had been a philosophical idealist at Bates and somewhat of a pragmatist at Ohio University, I now found myself moving in the direction of a humanistic-existential-phenomenological outlook toward learning, life and creativity. But what a wrench it was! In many respects I was compelled to choose ambiguity over clarity, develop a better understanding of the in-betweenness of learning moments, learn to appreciate consciousness of being conscious. True, I had read much about a variety of experimental learning modalities I KNEW, but I did not KNOW-FEEL. Naturally, I experienced many moments of discomfort. This occurred concurrently with the Berkeley Free Speech and Student Dissent Movements. Since I had always advocated attention to student needs and worked the proverbial 25-hour day with individuals seeking self-empowerment, I found myself identifying with students (whom I later preferred to call "learners") rather than the institutions from which they revolted. This led me to join them in Teach-ins about Viet Nam and student rights, at

Columbia, Antioch, Berkeley, Windham, wherever. At no time did I lose sight of the goals of student freedom, freedom of inquiry, self-empowerment. At times it was very scary and physically threatening, but it was a significant part of my own transformation.

The Antioch umbrella was, indeed, very important. An arena for experimenting with both ideas and social activism, I found it self-empowerina whenever I suggested a new program or modification of an old one. Upon making such proposals at Bates, I usually encountered an instant "No;" at Ohio University I encountered bureaucratic procedures as deterrents to making changes; at Antioch the response was, "Why not?" So long as one was willing to accept the consequences for one's action. What a breath of fresh air! <sup>8</sup>

Although few college or university administrators ever blocked me from interacting with students/ learners, I gained tenure at Bates by the skin of my teeth since the chair of my program said that I "could not advance very far" at the college for four reasons; namely, I "read too much, wrote too much, **MW** 1QQ m.wili. ~ M.th students and did not have a theological background." (He was a theologian!) At Ohio University one chairman of my department forbade me to meet a regular seminar at my home. Of course, there it was next to impossible to find enough time for students when I had five courses and as many as 400 students per semester. Now at Antioch I could balance my effort between facilitating learning, preparing for classes, publishing or perishing and fulfilling other responsibilities. Even in the face of discouragement, when some students could not or chose not to learn, the interaction with learners included paying attention to their frontiers of learning interests, assessing needs that THEY articulated rather than jamming them into a Procrustes-like curriculum. In fact, at Ohio University I developed considerable contempt for the concept of "course" and course descriptions that rarely fulfilled their promise.

## Learning Frontiers

No doubt the structure of institutions for which I have labored the past thirty years (Antioch, Union, Walden, Graduate School of America) has contributed to my humanistic processes and goals. Also, the so-called "courses" and "curriculums"-word and concepts that suggesting static relationships between learners and facilitators rather than dynamic ones. The Antioch masters programs continued the institution's half century of experience with work-study; we held informal seminars dealing with substantive issues, both practical and theoretical; we took field trips to assess social change programs in the South and inner cities of the North; we focused upon internships, both urban and rural. We used the latest in film technology until our eyes almost popped out of our heads, then burned midnight oil in small-group discussions, about both content and esthetics.

In that context I sat for hours in the dark doing process writing that became free verse and haiku, an activity that helped me gain insight about the value of writing in the dark (using block print), the value of keeping journals to describe inner reactions to anything and everything-which stretched my life-long facility at journal-keeping and taught me that this was an epistemological methodology that could be profoundly satisfying, brain-and-emotion clarifying, self-empowering with minimum risk of "what others might say." I began adding "Creative Writing" to my CV and conducted seminars to share these techniques. I learned to call myself "poet." But always at the frontier of learners' awareness-even while conducting parallel seminars in Civil Liberties, American Studies, alternative social scientific methodology balancing quantitative and qualitative outlooks. Even at the risk of pampering learners, I listened more carefully to their needs; and, under the tutelage of a skilled psychologist experienced what I experienced a seven-teen-year internship in listening. I came to appreciate Carl Rogers' insights about listening although I never practiced them clinically. By listening more perceptively, I could touch the inner core of an-



other person who really wanted to learn more profoundly than ever before.

Although I feared that I might lose my logical sharpness, in the face of evolving insights about left-brain and right-brain capacities, I trusted the processes and developed skills and knowledge I could never have expected to master. I wrote poetry as never before. I developed a technique for taking notes at interminably long meetings, recording contents on the left-hand side of my yellow pads and writing haiku, grooks and free verse down the right hand side.<sup>9</sup> These procedures not only kept me alert sometimes in the face of utter exhaustion, but they also taught me something about memory and further listening. Even to this day, I can reconstruct a meeting of 20-30 years ago simply by reading down both columns. Notes on the left side provide content; the right, affect. I can "read" the human qualities (also the dehumanizing) more sharply than when taking the usual kind of notes. These processes, too, led me into another kind of self-confidence; namely, to trust my perceptions, no matter at what level I was listening. Too, my seventeen-year internship with my Antioch colleague, Ben Thompson, was enhanced by comparing my perceptions with his whenever we had a "common" experience. While I recognized the dangers of sycophancy and mirror images, I carefully avoided those shoals in a variety of ways, sometimes arguing with him at great length and matching my perceptions with some of the so-called literature of the field.

By the time I took my one and only sabbatical in forty-plus years of teaching-learning, I was ready to write about dissent in American college education as well as study it for three months in Sproul Hall Plaza at Berkeley, experiment with some of my newly-discovered skills and insights. From that time to the present, working as "founding mother" of the Union Graduate School, through experiences as core faculty in the Walden program and so-called "mentor" in the Graduate School of America, I have honed what I call my humanistic perspectives while working with thousands of graduate students, many of whom I've encouraged to make

similar discoveries when taking advantage of a freer form of learning

### **Modus Operandi**

When first "meeting" any new learner, whether via letter, e-mail, telephone or face-to-face, my first task is to listen, listen at as many levels of consciousness as I'm capable, depending upon the situation. If I do not "understand" (perceive), I will ask what I call "dumb questions," usually the "why" queries which are usually gentle ways of encouraging others to return to their fundamental assumptions (I sometimes call this process "fundamental assumptions' therapy"). To repeat an observation made a few paragraphs ago, I sincerely believe that most people have "a story to tell" IF there are those who will listen. I listen to the words. I listen to the body language. I listen to the motivation. I listen to cries for help. In short, I listen at every human level. I do not worry too much about the time it takes, hence prefer open-ended human interactions to those locked into any chunk of clock time.

But, for three decades I have attempted to follow up discussions with other forms of interaction; letters to confirm an insight or share a poem or newspaper clipping that I may tie into or extend another's interests; any kind of networking that is enabling for another individual to contact a third or tenth person whose interests and needs may be similar. 10 And, if I join a learner's committee in a formal role, I usually reiterate by both oral and written communication what that relationship is. Usually, too, learners know when and where they may reach me. I write what I call "Mood Pieces" (call them newsletters or viewpoints if you will) and distribute them in much as Johnny Appleseed spread seeds across the nation. I am never sure what mood will "out" when I sit down to the typewriter or computer to share what I'm doing/thinking/reading with the recipients, but the pieces are fairly open. And during these three decades that openness has bred openness. I am certainly no Carl Rogers, but I think that I've en-

couraged the kind of learning modalities that he encouraged during his productive life. <sup>11</sup>

## Humanistic Yardsticks

Perhaps the most difficult transformation for humanists working in nontraditional higher education relates to a shift in role. Whereas the typical professor/instructor is a dispenser of knowledge (perambulating encyclopedia?) or purveyor of methodological "tricks of the trade," those working in "distance learning" must not only pay attention to the traditional skills but also have concern for human growth and development-characteristics with which traditionalists usually feel terribly uncomfortable. I explore some of those problems in my *Person-Centered* book and this is a mere mention of the characteristics. Challenged by accreditors and other critics to redefine "faculty role," I made a list of humanistic characteristics that I wished to practice; namely,

- accessibility
- promptness of response to demand
- resourcefulness (human; material; knowledge)
- willingness to be involved with learner's job, life
- balance between friendship, objective evaluation, human support
- willingness to take abuse
- ability to listen
- adapting communication to learner need
- keeping abreast of intellectual interests and skills <sup>12</sup>

It fit the characteristic of what Harold Hodgkinson calls a "self-anchoring scale." Having evolved the list, I then asked "my" learners to rank me on a scale of one-to-ten regarding these qualita-

tive criteria to enable me to see if I were living up to my own expectations. I did it over a period of a couple of years. Also I encouraged them to add other qualitative remarks. It was both revealing and helpful in adapting to a different spectrum of learner needs. But I was unsuccessful in encouraging colleagues "to go forth and do likewise." Why? Because such an approach can be very threatening. Too, it runs counter to the typical professor's self-concept of role. As Lyman Kittredge, the famous Harvard Shakespearean scholar once observed, "Who's going to test me?"

### **Some Problems**

Distance learning or universities without walls can be threatening in other ways, too. Learning and assessment thereof depends a great deal upon trusting accurate reporting. It is probably more subjective than objective, nor do most teachers, educated in traditional ways, see either the humor or reality in my observation that "objectivity is what I say it is!"<sup>13</sup> Trust depends upon the quality of communication as well as careful scrutiny of zillions of pages! It is difficult to find quantitative yardsticks with which to "measure," as though that is any easier with the "lonely crowds" and inaccessible faculty on typical campuses. A dispersed faculty who meet irregularly can rip off both institutions and learners; in some instances, faculty may hold at least two full-time jobs, for who is omnipresent enough to check them. Some of these folk systematically rip off their learners by setting narrow time-limits in which they be reached by phone. Answering machines and e-mail facilities can easily be used as shields. In short, wherever there is a will, there may be a won't! Supposedly accrediting is a monitoring process which detects such procedures and lends honesty to the process; but, unfortunately, accrediting at best is superficial, at worst absurd and is difficult to take seriously EXCEPT as a gateway or "union card" in our pragmatic, credentialing society.

### **Structural Factors**

For all the shortcomings of these programs and for all the difficulty of instituting humanistic elements in the structures, I do

feel some joy in having been a part of creating three such schools. Some of the elements in which I take particular pride:

-encouraging peer membership in committee structures (by making learners part of a "committee of equals" and basing that participation on the fundamental political assumptions and realities embedded in the *Tenth Federalist Paper*, any given candidate can gain some assurance that the cooperative and/or competing roles of committee members tend to check and balance one another and hence make him/her more participant in the process than "subject" to usual faculty power--or even whim; consensus decision-making, too, enhances humanistic results);

-by involving learners in every step in the process, via admissions, governance, PR, etc. they gain a kind of proprietary "right" that enhances motivation, use of wider degrees of learning modalities and development of more pride in the action. At its best they became a part of the institution, not mere clients paying tuition. In many ways, peers frequently contribute more profound knowledge, better emotional support than any other members of the institution.

-by being as interested in growth and development as their colleagues do, they become important participants in actualizing human potentiality in either Aristotelian or Maslovian terms). One of the vital parts of the Union program: growth and development as a key requirement, evidence for which must be documented, reflected upon, recorded in a graduate's transcript.

### **Specific Outcomes**

Unfortunately, nobody has yet triangulated the many constellations of achievement that have crossed these nontraditional skies; and, having NOT obtained specific permission to cite names and achievements, this record will be necessarily truncated simply to suggest the flavor of creativity:

-one man evolved an ergonomic tactic and strategy, building upon an economics and business background, participating in

the process by which both military and current office practices utilized human measurements empirically. His publications have contributed to the evolution of that field.

-a recent graduate expanded her project (thesis) into a book that became a national best seller on women's attitudes; another cut new ground by writing a novel about mother-daughter relationships;

-several persons (male and female) used their PhD work to launch into college presidencies, responsible governmental positions, new and imaginative interdisciplinary programs in traditional institutions.

-another is known as Dr. Toy because she has written several books on the topic of toys and has evaluated them for marketing and parental guides.

-others have been founders of health centers, new psychological and/or psychotherapeutic techniques, more humane senior facilities, international and national stress-reducing agencies, child assault literacy programs, earth-literacy projects, environmental programs with far-ranging human implications, new angles of vision when dealing with ethical issues in the medical field (often at the very edges of life-death issues), etc.

These illustrations are more metaphorical than definitive. It is not to claim that some of these persons would never have written the books, created the institutions or invented new techniques. Yet, one must remember that most of the persons entering such programs have built on the mid-career stages of their lives. When utilized to their best advantage, such programs enable their enrollees in the transition from one career to another, providing not only the far-ranging opportunities but also the networking, the encouragement, the mostly nonjudgmental contexts in which to create in every conceivable human field of endeavor.

My own personal journey has not been easy; but insofar as I mixed my sweat and brain waves with this learning movement, it

has been worthwhile. Today I feel comfortable using both backhoes and coffee spoons.

<sup>1</sup> For a superb and comprehensive evaluation of these assumptions, see Julie Thompson Klein's *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory and Practice*, Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1990, especially Part I.

<sup>2</sup> Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1977.

<sup>3</sup> "Freedom is Frightening," *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1980/1981, pp. 30-31.

<sup>4</sup> Bertrand Russell, quoted in *Smithsonian*, May, 1993, p. 142.6.

<sup>5</sup> See Carl Rogers "Chronological Bibliography," an Appendix in *A Way of Being* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), for a definitive bibliography of his writing.

<sup>6</sup> Attributed to Woodrow Wilson.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Hopkins was a teacher and moral philosopher. Before James Garfield became President of the US, he remarked that "the ideal college was Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other." CD-ROM Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia.

<sup>8</sup> See Edla M. Dixon, Ed. *Antioch: The Dixon Era, 1959-75, Perspectives of James P. Dixon*, Saco, Maine: Bastille Books, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> For one illustration of the utilization of this process, see Roy P. Fairfield, "New Use for the Muse?," *The Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. XX, No.1 (Spring, 1969), pp. 17-22.

<sup>10</sup> For some evaluation of Roy Fairfield as a networker, see John Briggs, *Fire in the Crucible: The Alchemy of Creative Genius*, NY: St. Martins, 1988.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Carl Rogers' *Freedom to Learn*.

<sup>12</sup> Fairfield, *Person-Centered Graduate Education*, Chapter 8.

<sup>13</sup> I coined this phrase many years ago, have used it in a variety of essays, editorials and teacher-learner situation.