

## Epilogue

### AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POSTSCRIPT

When I ask students to read and to think about stories, to reflect on who they are as readers, I can imagine a student might pose this question: Have you given any thought to your own reading and how you became enamored with stories? This question invites a memoir, and, most likely, far more about my own education as a reader than most of my students will have any desire to know. But I am not, I might say, opposed to this idea of a memoir of the kind the student's question invites. Given the nature of the question, perhaps the student will indulge me . . .

Winter has announced its arrival and the sun will only belatedly make an appearance today. There will be cold days ahead, all the more reason to appreciate the sun glinting off snow-covered rooftops that cascade down the hill and draw my eye to the river I cannot see, and then up, up a massive hillside on the far bank of that ghostly river.

The river lies out of sight in the valley below; a ten minute walk and I would stand on the river's bank. I know the presence of this river—out of sight—within walking distance—the way I know *literature*—always within walking distance but out of sight. I grew up on a small farm in Western Kentucky. Reading made it possible to imagine mighty rivers I could not see. The farm, in its own and so many ways a perfect place, was not a place that satisfied what I wanted from the world. What I sought could not be found on the farm; what I was looking for I found in books. In reading—book after book—I had the sense I was within walking distance of the learning I would need to be who I wanted to be. I was inevitably drawn to rivers I could not see.

In high school and college—I was a reader. I found no reason to quit reading when I ended up in law school, spent two years in the Army during my law school years, and then, after law school took up the practice of law. No one bothered to tell me that a law student doesn't have time to read novels! Now, I am a teacher of more than four decades, and I spend a good part of every day reading. Reading has the allure of stars in a ravenous winter sky; books have always been landmarks in the way I have charted my course in life, in the way I live. When I read, I don't feel a need to ponder whether I am in pursuit of literature or something else; it has been *books* and *reading* that have

defined my life. I come late to this idea that in reading I might ally myself with something grand called *literature*.

Literature, for me, is a symbol—a lofty, shimmering, abstraction—the Eiffel Tower and Egyptian Pyramids we find pictured on postcards. When I think of literature, I inevitably think of English professors, several who have been neighbors over the years. My English professor neighbors far outnumber the English professors I knew as a college student, and I would be more than a little dishonest to claim that I knew the professor in my single literature course my first year in college—1963. November that year, John F. Kennedy was shot in Dallas. I had just walked out of a chemistry class when I heard the news. I have distinct memories of that chemistry course; the literature course I was required to take that first year of college left me with little in the way of a lasting impression, no more than a latent foot-print of an impression.

What do I remember from that college literature course? Lectures in a large auditorium-style classroom. Several hundred mute students scribbling notes. Whatever may have been said about literature in that far removed course is debris long ago swept out to sea. I suspect that the teacher of that course, faced with a mass of head-down scribblers, may have had the same desire to be elsewhere that a good many of us in the course had. The teacher—I can't remember whether the professor was a man or a woman—may have made worthwhile claims about literature; whatever claims may have been made, the course seems to have left me with an empty wallet.

I must have been one of those students taking notes in that long-ago literature course. My old course notes may have survived, and if they do, they might provide evidence that I was invited, in those college years of a half-century past, to learn something about literature, something that I could have made a part of my education. The notes—if by chance they exist—would be filed away in the several hundred boxes of files I hold on to for some uncertain future. To be honest, I don't remember the name of that old literature course. English 101? Introduction to Literature? Curious, I locate the University of Kentucky website and request a transcript of my grades. The course turns out to have been Freshman Composition, not English Literature; and, having eluded the grasp of memory entirely, I learn that the course extended over two semesters. I received a C both semesters!

Robertson Davies observes that “[w]e all have slumbering realms of sensibility which can be coaxed into wakefulness by books.”<sup>1</sup> I can claim with some certainty that nothing prescribed in that freshman year composition course prompted any kind of awakening. I distinctly recall that we were assigned a novel; I want to think it was a novel by Thomas Hardy. Or was it Henry James? I remember I found the choice, Hardy or James, peculiar. What we may have been asked to do in reading the novel (whatever novel it may have been), what we were told about literature in the course of reading the novel, and how we might have been asked to think about ourselves as readers, has all been obliterated by the greedy ravages of time. Whatever novel we were asked to read, whatever may or may not have been said about literature, it did not undermine my desire to read. I was oblivious then—and for many years after—to the possibility that *reading* might be connected to something called *literature*.<sup>2</sup>

I was a reader before I was an anonymous student in that Freshman Composition course. That I am a reader today seems to have had little if any connection to that college composition course or any college course or to particular texts I may have been assigned to read.<sup>3</sup> Being a student is one thing, being a reader is something else.

What I am, and what I have always wanted to be is a *reader*. I live among books; I think about them, teach them, keep them near at hand. I watch the sprawl of books progress from one room of the house to another, taking over space, basement to attic. In the years when I was traveling, I carried one bag of clothes and toiletries, a large daypack filled with books. I am surprised that books don’t have more of a

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<sup>1</sup> Robertson Davies, *A VOICE FROM THE ATTIC: ESSAYS ON THE ART OF READING* 13 (New York: Penguin Books, rev. ed., 1990). James Boyd White reminds us that “[r]eading is its own art, presenting its own dangers and opportunities . . .” James Boyd White, *LIVING SPEECH: RESISTING THE EMPIRE OF FORCE* 92 (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> I am curious what kind of reader, what kind of teacher I might have ended up being if I had studied literature with Wendell Berry, one of Kentucky’s finest writers—a poet, novelist, essayist—who joined the Department of English at the University of Kentucky to teach creative writing in 1964, the year after I arrived at the university for my first year of college.

<sup>3</sup> Working on this epilogue, I found a crumbling copy of S.I. Hayakawa’s *Language in Thought and Action* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1963) that was an assigned text in my freshman composition course. My copy is heavily underlined but reading the passages now, I can’t figure out how I was to make use of the Hayakawa book to become a reader or a writer, or how it might help me appreciate and savor literature.

presence in my dreams.<sup>4</sup> Surrounded by books and stories, I have never been able to to imagine a more exquisite way to spend my days than I do—reading.

When I was in law school, the Kennedy Book Store on Limestone Street, adjacent to the campus, became the destination of a good many leisurely walks. The bookstore was a warehouse of books, with nothing like the inviting cafes and coffee bars found in modern day bookstores. What I remember about the Kennedy Book Store is a massive floor of open space with dozens of waist-high wood bins filled with used books; the outer walls were lined with shelves of course text books. There seemed to have been no effort of any kind at organization of the books in the bins. Psychology books rested alongside cookbooks, books on Greek mythology kept company with anthropology and political science. Most of the books were priced 25¢ or 50¢. John Batt, my criminal law teacher, frequently mentioned books in class, and whenever he did, I made the trek to Kennedy's to see if I could find the books Batt had talked about in class. Batt introduced me, in that Criminal Law course, to Freud and the Freudians, and I began to acquire books on psychoanalysis and psycho-therapy, psychiatry and psychology. The Kennedy Book Store was the source of the books I first acquired with the idea of having a *library*—a collection of books I thought I needed to read, books I would carry with me from place to place. What I did not realize then is that a *library* means living with books; for me a library meant that books would be a central part of my life.<sup>5</sup>

I was, from the day I arrived in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, age six, sold on the idea of being a student. I wanted to be a student not because I had a particularly studious nature; I wanted to be a student because it allowed me to be in the presence of books. I don't know the seed of this affinity for books and for reading. I don't know why, even today, I experience a wild rush of pleasure when I physically hold a book, turn the pages, and encounter the reality of so much I do not know. I have always associated books with being *elsewhere*, as a mode of *travel*. The only books we had at home when I was growing up were a single-volume medical encyclopedia and a Bible or two. We didn't subscribe to the newspaper, and when we finally got our first TV, the programs offered little beyond fluff

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<sup>4</sup> I did, recently, have a book dream of sorts (actually a fragment of a dream): *I learn that 91 students have signed up for the Lawyers and Literature course. I am astounded!*

<sup>5</sup> I can note here that my library and my reading have, oddly enough, seldom been guided in any significant way by what I was studying as a student.

and frivolity. It would require a hubris I do not possess to think of myself as a self-made man, but in the devotion to books—to reading—I seem to have tapped into a fate designated for me by the gods.<sup>6</sup>

In the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, I got it in my head I would be a scientist. In high school, I got interested in electronics and became an amateur radio operator. When I got to college, the decision to major in electrical engineering felt more like an acquiescence to destiny than a decision. I had been following a clearly charted path. Then, early my freshman year, I ran into trouble: calculus gave me fits, I found myself living in a dorm with fellow engineering students, few who had any interest in books, and my phantasy about college—a long envisioned *elsewhere*—was now threatened. I had always thought of college as a place and a time when I could devote my time to reading, thinking about books. It dawned on me, roughly and without warning: a degree in engineering is not an *education* of sorts but it is not a reader's education.

I had amassed several shelves of books at home when I left for college, none of them of sufficient interest to pack up to carry with me. But there is a book I picked up at the Kennedy Book Store in my first year of college—Virginia Voeks, *On Becoming an Educated Person*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1964—a book that I still have, a book that helped me, early on, see what kind of student I wanted to be and helped me understand the fear that pursuing a degree in engineering would not allow me to be. If my memory is right, my friend Deno Curriss suggested the Voeks book to me. Deno, working on his Ph.D. when I first met him, was the embodiment of an intellectual; he was the kind of student I fantasized I might become if I broke free of engineering. I suspect that Deno, when he recommended the Voeks book to me, saw my life as a student post-engineering far more clearly than I did.

Rereading the Voeks book today, I find it a hybrid mix of commonsense and philosophy that underlie the ideals we associate with being a

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<sup>6</sup> My parents—who did not graduate from high school—knew that dropping out of school left them destined to live a hard life. This made them all the more resolute—especially my mother—that my brother and I *stay in school*. (My brother became a veterinarian surgeon.) School, as it turned out, was never an issue. I set out to study electrical engineering, and gave up on that destination my first year in college. I found that I didn't have a clue about what I was going to do after I abandoned my major in electrical engineering. I ended up in political science, a place holder destination until I could figure out what I wanted to do. An account of how I ended up in law school will await another day.

student. The first passage in the book—I underlined the passage over fifty years ago—reads, “The dreams we build and the life we lead sometimes differ by staggering amounts. This need not be. We can reduce that gap and build a life which accords quite closely to our dreams.”<sup>7</sup> The reality of my college work and my dream of being the kind of student I saw in Deno Curris may have diverged like two paths in the woods, but I never found the incongruity of my life as a student and my life as a reader a matter of troubling concern.

*On Becoming an Educated Person* offers practical suggestions on how to be a good student, but what clearly captured my attention was what Voeks had to say about being an educated person. In my first reading of the book, I liberally underlined phrases where Voeks promised that I could “develop deeper comprehension of this world” of which I was a part and, in doing so, “go on learning.” Voeks argued that a student can develop an ability “to see interrelationships of all kinds and make new, more meaningful integrations” and “build wider, deeper interests and develop the habits of continually extending” these interests. My college years, according to Voeks, could be a time to “develop an increasing appreciation and love for the arts—including skillful compositions of all sorts.” With an education, I could “develop a deeper compassion and understanding of . . . other people.”<sup>8</sup> Returning to Voeks, decades later, I see that the education Voeks described was what I feared I would not find in engineering. The only source of education that I have ever found that would fulfill Voeks vision of an educated person is in the kind of reading I do for myself, informed by teachers who encourage reading (in beyond the subject and course they happen to be teaching. Parker Palmer observes that “[s]tudents are formed by the reading they do, by the views of self and world such reading presents.”<sup>9</sup> Palmer’s observation was not a lesson I would learn in college but from my own life of reading beyond the classrooms where I happened to be a student. I learned by the mysteries of an alchemy I do not fully understand, to live in the midst of a dream, a dream of boundless reading that I now know as *education*.

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia Voeks, *ON BECOMING AN EDUCATION PERSON* ix (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1964) (preface to 1<sup>st</sup> ed.).

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 4-24.

<sup>9</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *TO KNOW AS WE ARE KNOWN: A SPIRITUALITY OF EDUCATION* 19 (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

This idea of *education* continues to haunt me. I can't be assured, even today, I know how reading gets translated into education. I am willing to concede that there is a touch of mystery and a potion of magic that finds its way into that translation. I don't know how—exactly—this translation works and I don't know how to teach so that it can happen to anyone else.