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Collaborating with One's Own Assignments

by Jim Persoon



Collaboration, the special topic treated in this issue of the *Grand Valley Review*, is usually thought of in terms of people and institutions: education-based cooperative endeavors such as team-teaching, professors and students collaborating on research, as well as parents, teachers, and pupils working together in the schools. An example of educational-community service collaboration is a project such as that of the poet Sharon Olds of New York University who brings her creative writing students to hospital wards to write with and about the patients there. These kinds of collaboration illustrate the most common meaning of the word. To collaborate is to work together.

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A less common usage of the word is “cooperation with an enemy.” The four or five Frenchmen who were not in the Underground fighting with the Resistance but were, presumably, above ground, cooperating with their Nazi rulers, are called “collaborationists.” This more pejorative meaning of the word can also inform our work at the university. In the university context, who or what is the “enemy” with whom we might choose to work rather than engage in battle? My own very narrowly framed answer is that the stack of papers I receive weekly from students can seem like an enemy with whom I must work. The most productive way I’ve found to deal with my sometime recoiling before a batch of papers is to collaborate with my own assignment from the beginning.

What this means in its simplest form is that I write the papers which I require my students to write. As a teaching idea, this is hardly new, nor my own. But putting it into practice takes a discipline and commitment that I didn't have when I first heard the idea at some teaching conference in some anonymous hotel a dozen years ago. I let my students help me. If they ask a lot of questions about an assignment, I know that it is one which I either have not thought through well enough, and so deserve to be sentenced to do with them, or is one which requires real engagement and will produce real growth, and thus is worth doing for me as well as for them.

Let me illustrate with two examples from the Liberal Studies course I teach, LIB 314, *Life Journey*, a course developed at Grand Valley by Professor Milton Ford. The course itself, by the way, depends upon collaboration, in that it marries psychology and literature and draws its staff from many disciplines, who meet as a "life journey staff" to discuss our various approaches. Some of the texts commonly used, such as Carol Pearson's *The Hero Within*, have been used in psychology courses, literature courses, as well as this general education liberal studies course.

I will not reproduce my assignment sheets here. If the paper responding to the assignment is any good, it will reveal the assignment clearly. In the words of our past Freshman Composition director, Roger Gilles, "the paper will tell you how it should be read; if it doesn't, it hasn't done its job." What follows are two papers of mine, responding to assignments that at first seemed to the students, and to me, an enemy to be avoided, then to be overcome. Finally, though, both students and I came to see the assignment as something to collaborate with, in a sense.

Warrior Beats Martyr

Carol Pearson's *The Hero Within* encourages us to see our own life's journey as a saga in which we are the heroes, and one of our roles is

the warrior, traditionally the most heroic of the archetypes. We honor martyr-heroes such as Christ in our culture, but even more we honor winners. For every Obie-Wan-Kenobee who transcends battle by giving himself up to the sword, there are ten Luke Skywalkers, Han Solos, Rambos, Terminators, and \$20-million-a-picture-action stars who thrill us. We even identify with morally questionable characters, such as Vito and Michael Corleone in *The Godfather*, and Clint Eastwood in his spaghetti Westerns or *Dirty Harry* films, because they strive so mightily and overcome so much. Even in the softer, caring, more martyr-like roles which our culture places before our eyes, it is the never-say-die, battle-to-the-end spirit we admire—the cancer patient who fights for life, not the one who accepts what is happening and lets go. I haven't seen *Titanic*, so tell me if I'm wrong, but I predict that, although it contains admirable martyrs who go down with the ship, the stars fight off the icy cold and every other challenge to survive. Did I get it right?

When I think of modern warriors, I don't think back to my own army experiences—for most soldiers, it's just one vast bureaucracy, like a high school with thousands of principals overseeing hundreds of thousands of wily or scamming or boisterous or apathetic adolescents. I think instead of sports, played by those gladiators on TV or by the likes of us in our backyards. The language of warriors is the language that we use in sports and games. I was once an offensive tackle. Therefore I fought “in the trenches,” as if Friday night football were World War I. We use this language in our work lives, too, “winning” promotions, making good career “moves” (as if a career were a board game like chess), planning “strategies” for success. I even heard a radio ad for investment banking that talked about “deploying assets with a target in mind,” as if saving for retirement by buying into a mutual fund were the same thing as Norm Schwartzkopf hoping his Patriot missiles could knock out Saddam Hussein's SCUD missiles. And notice how, in that sentence I've just written, a sports metaphor, from boxing, can so easily be

inserted into a military context. Sports and war are clearly interconnected in our minds.

The sports story I most remember, however, is more about martyrdom, I think, though it has a bit of the warrior archetype in it, as inevitably all sports stories must. It was when I was twelve, during a Fourth-of-July baseball game that we always played in our little town until dark, when the game would be called and the stands would empty and we would all sit on blankets on the outfield grass to watch the Volunteer Fire Department, who were our fathers, set off the huge fireworks that we imagined were bombs and rockets overhead. I was the youngest by a couple of years. The older boys were heroes to me. If only I could throw like Lynn or Tom Tomjack. If only my little brother and I could one day develop into a double-play combo like Douglas and Billy Shears. If only we had a really big family like the Kipleys, who could field their own team.

I was a miserable hitter. That year I was 0-for-the-seventh-grade. I was also a miserable fielder, despite hours of throwing a rubber ball off the barn foundation. Still, I hoped one day to play second-base for the Minnesota Twins, who were using up second-basemen faster than the Kipleys going through an all-you-can-eat buffet. Our priest yelled out to me that day, after I had thrown out a particularly slow runner by knocking down a ball and aiming it at first base, "You'll make a pretty good second baseman some day, if your chest holds out!" I don't think that was a compliment, though my sore chest puffed out with pride at the recognition.

It was a well-played game. We were only down 21-10 in the seventh inning when we started our winning rally. Shearses and Tomjacks were circling the bases while Kipleys were madly trying to throw them out, and before you knew it Billy Shears was standing on third base for the second time that inning and he was the tying run. I was on deck, and as nervous as Willie Mays in that 1953 playoff game, with the Brooklyn Dodgers up by two, two-on and two-out, bottom of the ninth. Willie was a rookie. He must have

been praying for Bobby Thomson to homer and end it or make an out and end it, anything but get a hit or a walk and prolong the game so that it would be up to Willie. If that's how Willie felt, that's how I felt ten times over. I was praying and praying it wouldn't be up to me, that it would end on the next play. The batter hit a dribbler to first base.

Billy broke from third.

Joe Kipley threw home.

I stood there.

SMACK—it hit Billy in the head. He went down, then stood up. He looked at me, but his eyes weren't there, just white eyeballs. He was walking in circles around me. His parents ran out of the stands and laid him down on the ground. They took him to their car and drove to the next town to the doctor. The umpire called the game. Billie had scored and so it was a tie game, he said. I was relieved.

Billie didn't make it. He had been a hero of mine, and I felt like an unworthy squire to this knight. I had just looked at him when he was spinning around needing help.

My feelings were nothing to those of Joe Kipley. Outside the church I saw him weeping violently. After the funeral too. His large family comforted him, but no one else did. After that, he was a sort of pariah. No one really blamed him, but you could see he blamed himself, and no one stepped in to tell him any differently. He went into the army, survived Vietnam, got his teeth fixed. When he came back, hardly anyone recognized him. Getting his teeth fixed had changed the shape of his face. I hoped it would give him a new outlook, but he always carried a heaviness after that Fourth of July. He died a few years later when he fell off a silo. He's buried in Sacred Heart Cemetery, about ninety feet from Billie Shears' grave.

"Settling Down": Black, Gay, and an Artist

Daniel Levinson in *The Seasons of a Man's Life* (1978) describes one of the seasons, or stages, as "settling down." In a man's life, this is the period that covers, roughly, ages thirty-three to forty. Levinson lists five general patterns for this stage: 1) advancement within a stable life structure; 2) failure within that structure; 3) breaking out; 4) gradual change because of advancement; 5) struggle with an unstable life structure (Levinson 150). This period of settling down is described by Levinson as the end of a larger period, the novice phase (ages seventeen to forty), during which a man has been working on four major tasks: forming a dream; forming a mentor relationship; forming an occupation; forming love relationships, marriage, and family (90).

My subject is a forty-year-old man who, by Levinson's categories, is likely to be roughly at the very end of the settling down phase. In working on his four major tasks, this subject, whom I will call Galahad, will by this point in his life probably have followed one of the five general patterns of the settling down period. That is, he will probably already have a dream, a mentor, an occupation, and a relationship, and he will be advancing, failing, breaking out, or changing. Levinson's fifth possibility is that he will not have achieved much stability yet with his four tasks.

My subject, Galahad, is personable, highly intelligent, and artistic. He has had uneven success in his twenties and thirties with the four tasks of the novice phase:

Forming a Dream. This came very early for Galahad. At about the age of ten he decided to become a musician. At sixteen, he entered the University of Michigan on academic and music scholarships and focused on the instrument and type of music he wished to play.

Finding a Mentor. In elementary school, a stern, Irish-Catholic teacher recognized his talent. His music teachers at succeeding lev-

els were his mentors. The most important mentoring relationship, with a professor at the U of M, never achieved its full closeness, Galahad believes, because of issues of sexual orientation. Race, too, was a factor, as he felt like a “token” or “quota,” rather than recognized just for his talent.

Forming an Occupation. He supported himself from ages twenty-one to twenty-five with music, then gave up his dream and worked many jobs—security guard, print shop, later as a substance-abuse counselor, AIDS counselor, actor, and teacher. He re-made his commitment to music at age twenty-eight and established himself with a regional symphony orchestra at age thirty-three, while still acting and giving lessons as additional means of support.

Finding love, marriage, family. An encounter with literature, E.M. Forster’s novel *Maurice*, at age twelve, gave him words for his feelings about sexuality. He was “outed” at age sixteen, which almost prevented his attending college that year. Within the last five years he has achieved a stable love relationship, though he is unsure about permanent commitment to it, and of course marriage is legally prohibited. He lives alone.

Of the five patterns that Levinson presents as possibilities for the settling down period, Galahad’s life most closely resembles the fifth, the unstable life structure. Several factors are responsible. First, Galahad’s dream of becoming a musician is difficult to achieve in this society as a stable occupation. Even the most successful musicians find that their employment histories are often up and down. It was for them that Congress and the IRS invented income-averaging. The most stable jobs are in music education, but that often means that the artist has given up the dream of performing for a living. A second difficulty for Galahad may perhaps come from factors of class and race. Levinson’s sample includes only two Afri-

can-Americans and so cannot generalize about any possible differences resulting from this factor. Galahad is an African-American from a middle-class background. While music was valued in his home, classical music was not, and the lack of role models who had achieved his dream has made it difficult to find mentors to map out the pathway a little more clearly. A third difference in Galahad's life is his sexual orientation. Levinson's fourth task, forming "love, marriage, and family" relationships is by our society's laws difficult for a gay person, and in the case of marriage impossible.

Black, gay, and attempting to live life as an artist, Galahad would probably be classed as pattern five, unstable life structure. In many ways, though, he is significantly outside Levinson's stages. If the goal is to achieve a stable occupation, with mentors to guide one, and a stable marriage and family life, one might predict, almost before interviewing Galahad, that he would end the novice phase of adulthood struggling to put into place the structure which the majority of Levinson's subjects built. Of his so-called "disabilities" (as he calls them), Galahad ranks his pursuit of art the most difficult, followed by sexual orientation, and then race. He is a psychologically and spiritually aware person, gifted with insight brought on by years of work and introspection. These qualities, however, seem to have no place in Levinson's early seasons, being assigned exclusively to the last phase of the life journey—old age.

Conclusion

Doing one's own assignments certainly teaches many things—I know the value of these two better now than I ever could before doing them. I also know little details about the assignments, such as how long they really take to do, or if there are unforeseen and unintended difficulties. They also function as models, as ways to do the assignment. I can not prove it, but I do believe that our energy as teachers is better spent writing our assignments than writing over-

long, three-to-four-page assignment sheets. As some proof of this claim, I offer the observation that my students read my “papers” more avidly and refer more often to them than to any sheet of directions I’ve ever produced.

An ancillary value, but the most important and surprising one for me personally, is discovering things I could not predict I would learn. The first paper above sketches a childhood memory which I always thought was about the death of a boy I looked up to. I now think that it is about the heavy load of suffering that another boy carried throughout his life. The second paper summarizes an interview with a friend. I had titled it, cleverly, “Black, Gay, and an Artist.” When I finished the paper, I noticed an oddity. During the interview, I had asked my friend which of the labels we used in the paper had been the hardest for him to overcome. His reply was in the inverse order of my title. I suddenly realized some of my “benign” assumptions about race as well as sexual orientation were telling me more about me than about him. And I felt a new level of identity with him, in our mutual struggle to be artists. I would not be writing this, if I had not learned—by writing—that. Which is to say that switching loyalties and identities, from teacher to student, is not traitorous, but rather an honorable course for any of us who claim to have something to profess to the people in our classes. ❖