

REFLECTIONS ON MY JOURNEY THROUGH ACADEME

by *Lonnell E. Johnson*

*How I got over,
How I got over, my Lord.
My soul looks back and wonders
How I got over.
(traditional gospel song)*

Recently, while celebrating my 60th birthday, I reflected on my rather circuitous journey into higher education. Having ventured into teaching on the college level somewhat late in life, I marveled at the providential circumstances leading to my present position as a professor of English at Otterbein College.

At 25, as a registered pharmacist drafted into the army, I discovered the joy of classroom teaching when I became a pharmacy instructor in the Medical Field Service School at Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Fifteen years later at 40, I discovered untold pleasures studying literature and teaching writing as a graduate student pursuing a master's degree in English. I ventured back into pharmacy, working part-time in a hospital while enrolled in a Ph.D. program in English with a minor in Afro-American Studies. I continued to work part-time as a hospital pharmacist while teaching full-

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time in English for eight years following the completion of my doctorate. When I accepted my current faculty position in Ohio eight years ago, I gave up pharmacy work.

I have encountered influential teachers, from grade school through graduate school and beyond. Now that I am a teacher, I recognize more clearly their influence and pay tribute to some of those who have touched my life in powerful ways. Some of these teachers are no longer with us,

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but their legacies still impact me as I endeavor to affect those students whom I am privileged to teach.

One teacher who made a lasting impression upon me was my 6th grade math teacher John A. Peoples, Jr.—my first Black male teacher, who modeled for me a competent, caring teacher who taught me much more than mathematics. He later earned his doctorate, becoming a principal and subsequently going on to become president of Jackson State

University in his native Mississippi, where he led that historically Black college to a new level of excellence during his long tenure as its president.

A number of high school teachers introduced me to literature and the love for the English language. I was introduced to the power of poetry in my freshman year of high school when Mrs. Frances Uncapher, my English teacher, read aloud the narrative poetry of William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, James Whitcomb Riley, and other “three-named” authors. She read their works and discussed their poetry as if she were personally acquainted with each author.

In my junior year, Mrs. Hortense House required our English class to memorize two poems: “Barter” by Sara Teasdale, and “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost. More than 40 years later, I can still recite those works from memory and have incorporated them into a number of composition and literature classes I have taught at Otterbein College.

I also recall the words of one of my senior English teachers, Mrs. Nathalie Zeidman, who exhorted her students to “Read! Read! Read!” I followed her advice, and, upon graduation from high school in 1960, enrolled as a pharmacy student at Purdue University, where I continued to meet teachers who would have a dynamic impact upon my life.

Years later, I recognized that the seeds of the poet I would later become had been sown in my college years. In 1961, I happened to notice a poster advertising a lecture on the Purdue campus. Dr. Rosey Pool was

going to present a lecture "Beyond the Blues," a discussion and reading of Black poetry. At the time, I was a pharmacy major but thought the topic sounded interesting, and so I went just out of curiosity. Aside from Phyllis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar, most of the poets she mentioned were unknown to me. The lecture sparked an interest in reading more of these and other poets, and two years later when I took an oral interpretation course, I put together a reading of works by African American poets for my final presentation. Since that time African American poetry has become one of the passions of my life.

Twenty years later in 1981, I enrolled in the Ph.D. program at Indiana University. I completed a dissertation in 1986 entitled "Portrait of the Bondslave in the Bible: Slavery and Freedom in the Works of Four Afro-American Poets." Remarkably, I first heard of three of those poets at that providential lecture in 1961.

As an undergraduate student at Purdue, I encountered many excellent instructors, but unquestionably the most memorable was my speech instructor, who became my mentor and dear friend, Professor William M. Hardy. During my junior year in pharmacy school, he was the first and only person to suggest that I consider changing my major from pharmacy to English or speech. For purely pragmatic reasons I did not follow his advice but went on to graduate from Purdue in pharmacy, becoming licensed in Indiana and practicing hospital pharmacy for a number of years before I realized the wisdom of his counsel.

After a period of time, I reestablished correspondence with Bill Hardy, and he encouraged me to go on to graduate school in English. Years later, our paths would cross again when I accepted a position teaching English at Fayetteville State University prior to his retirement from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Eventually I went on to graduate school at Emporia State University in Kansas where I met exceptional teachers while earning my master's degree in English. When I returned to Indiana as a Consortium on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) Minorities Fellow at Indiana University in Bloomington, I was introduced to other teachers who also made a difference in my life. I took my first seminar as a doctoral student under Professor John M. McCluskey, Jr., author, scholar in African-American literature, and former CIC Director, who introduced me to the Harlem

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Renaissance. This rich period in African-American literature provided a fertile field for a number of articles and inspired courses that I have taught at Fayetteville State and Otterbein College. McCluskey went on to direct my dissertation and remains a valued friend and colleague.

At an Otterbein faculty retreat a couple of years ago, I met Parker J. Palmer, master teacher and consultant on higher education. Later a number of faculty members read and discussed his book *To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*. At the risk of offering a cliché, my encounter with Dr. Palmer “changed my life” in that it altered significantly my classroom ethos. I have incorporated his definition of teaching—“To create a space where the community of truth is practiced,”¹—into my composition and literature syllabi, elaborating upon the concept with this statement:

One of the primary objectives of this course is to establish the classroom as a “safe haven” where fruitful, meaningful dialogue and exchange of ideas take place. We strive to provide a place where ideas may be challenged and minds may be changed or positions affirmed, but where ideas, views, and responses are listened to with respect and where courtesy is always maintained. We will engage in dialogue with the texts through reading and writing and with one another through discussion and peer editing.



In one of the sessions conducted by Parker Palmer at the faculty retreat, participants were asked to describe a moment when we knew we were destined to be a teacher. I related a particular incident that had occurred early in my teaching career.

I had been teaching a freshman composition and literature class, covering how to organize an essay with a clearly stated thesis. As I had so many times before, I discussed the importance of presenting an engaging introduction to catch the reader's attention. I then emphasized the significance of the body of the paper, the heart of the discussion. As I was about to discuss the conclusion, a student in the rear of the classroom interrupted me in mid-sentence. She startled the class as she blurted out, "I get it!" She explained that she now understood how to organize her paper. As I looked into her sparkling eyes and smiling face, I detected a familiar look of enlightenment. That instant of recognition with that student was a golden moment in which I knew I was born to teach.

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For me teaching is the convergence of what I do for a living with what I do for pleasure. Frost in his poem "Two Tramps at Mudtime" relates this challenge of merging these two ideals:

But yield to who will their separation,
My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.
Only where love and need are one,
And the work is play for mortal stakes,
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.²

I concur with William Vitek in his "Reflections on the Teaching Art":

I prefer to see teaching as an art and having many wonderful intangibles. To do so leaves open the possibility that what we do in the classroom works even if we are not always certain why. It invites spontaneity and creativity. . . .³

The teacher as artist is certainly a valid concept. Indeed, I continue to develop a deep appreciation for those education professionals who have

elevated the art of teaching to new levels of excellence. Unfortunately, teachers are among those whose artistic endeavors are often undervalued and unappreciated. To some extent I was inspired to write this essay to express my gratitude to some of the notable masters of the teaching art.

Shortly after arriving at one of my last teaching appointments, one of the professors in the English Department retired after more than thirty years of teaching. As a kind of self-appointed "poet laureate", I volunteered to write a poem that I recited at her retirement dinner. The title is taken from a statement by Leslie Fiedler, noted literary critic, who commented that "The teacher's task is to patiently explain."

This sonnet seems an appropriate way to pay tribute to those specific teachers whom I have mentioned and a host of other excellent educators, all of whom I could not possibly call by name but who helped to shape my life.

The Teacher's Task

For all those called to teach

The smallest spark can kindle a desire,
Ignite a fire to stir and warm the heart,
And through the years the embers from that fire
Will glow with light inflamed from that same start.
In the dark of night should a doubt arise,
A question of the road less traveled by,
Recall that same glow in a student's eyes
Shall dispel the chill of questioning why.
You who labored in the classroom have learned
That rapport with student, colleague and friend
Offers recompense beyond wages earned.
You who loved the teacher's task we commend:
May joy warm your heart and sustain you yet,
With memories of success and no regret.

When I recall the teachers who have most impressed me and seek to pay tribute to them, I recognize that many of them have been amazingly versatile. Teaching demands flexible individuals who are able to adapt quickly in an academic setting and perform a variety of functions, one of which is to be a motivator or coach. A number of years ago, I offered a seminar "The Coach Approach: A Successful Teaching Model." Actually, I see myself as coach or exhorter, offering advice, tips and strategies for writing assignments that each student must complete individually. In composition and literature classes, my goal is to inspire students to present the best writing they have completed thus far. Often I repeat the slogan recited in my earlier school days: "Good, better, best! Never let it

rest until your good is better and your better is best!" Joe Dunn in his discussion of the teacher as coach notes, "Winning coaches demand high levels of performance and must have well-rounded motivational skills."⁴

One of the essential functions of the winning teacher/coach is that of being a "recruiter." According to Dunn, "Faculty members should seek out talent as well. They should assist eagerly in the institution's effort to attract the best student body possible—their classroom 'players'."⁵

Those teachers who most affected me "sparked" something that drew me into teaching, and so I endeavor to light the flame in others and by my example draw them into teaching, as I was drawn. Recently, in a sense, I "recruited" my younger daughter, who, after completing an undergraduate degree in communications, is now working as a teacher in middle school while pursuing certification in language arts along with a Master of Arts in Teaching degree.

As a writing instructor perhaps a more appropriate designation for me would be 'player coach' in that not only do I teach writing but I am a writer as well.

As one of the advisors to education majors with a language arts concentration, I am continually on the look out for prospective teachers. I am particularly aggressive in terms of seeking out prospective teachers of color to help offset the diminishing pool of minority teachers. In the same way that an expert gemologist keeps a jeweler's glass around his neck when examining precious gems, I keep my eyes open, ever watchful for those rare "blue diamonds" whose color adds to their value and rarity. Males who choose to go into education, at any level, are like precious gems, but those exceptional students who select elementary education as their choice are extremely rare and priceless, in my estimation.

As a writing instructor perhaps a more appropriate designation for me would be "player coach" in that not only do I teach writing but I am a writer as well. Likewise, I also classify myself as a "student-teacher" in that I am continually discovering that there is so much to learn about the art of teaching. Now that I think about it, I continue to play a variety of roles as an educator: artist-student-teacher-player-coach, a kind of factotum in education.

So after considerable reflection, my journey of discovery seems to culminate with a revelation of who I really am metaphorically: a griot. This multifaceted character, an essential figure in many West African cultures, is a village elder who fills a number of valuable roles: public servant to the King, historian, genealogist, entertainer, poet, and magistrate, among

other functions. Most significantly he is venerated as a teacher.

I conclude my reflective essay on my journey into education with this poetic self-portrait:

I Am A Griot

"You can be who you want to be
when you find out who you are."

Cookin' Mama
Christian Rock Group

I am a griot.

I am a servant, bonds slave in the service of the King, my father; a servant after the order of King David, from whom the Savior descended. Like Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, I too am born of royal seed. Descendent from countless generations, I am born of the seed of David. According to the prophet Jeremiah:

As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, neither the sand of the sea measured: so will I multiply the seed of David my servant, and the Levites that minister unto me.

I am a griot.

I am a poet—psalmist—master of rhyme—master craftsman, word-smith—an artificer seeking to forge with words this joy unspeakable, a sonneteer, balladeer, crafting compositions flowing from the soul of a man who swapped his lowdown blues for pure turquoise joys, choosing to compose oral ointments and pouring pure, holy anointing oil to soothe the soul, compounded after the art of the apothecary.

I am a griot.

I am a singer—conveying melodies heard in my inner ear—having understood lyrics I did not know when I was young. . .I, too, sing my song and hold no strife. . .knowing the best lines are yet to be sung; an entertainer, embodying the oral tradition, infusing music into my poetry, now I see:

"I got the music in me! I got the music in me!
I got the music in me!"

I am a griot.

I am a genealogist—unraveling the begetting and the begotten—recollecting the forgotten—connecting fathers and sons and mothers and daughters—more than a mediator—a daysman—ambassador extraordinaire—breaking it down and making it plain:

Wild young man, tell me, who's your daddy?
Wild young man, let me tell you who's your daddy.

Rescuing from oblivion the memories of great men and women of humble means, never despising small beginnings; a raconteur, retelling the stories of "Real Heroes" who never swell the ranks among annals of recorded time; and declaring their line that goes forth from all the earth.

I am a griot.

I am an historian—a vessel of speech—a speaking document—a talking book—I let my life speak: listen to my life—page by page. "Your life is a book and everyday is a page" thus spoke Elijah, the prophet; an accoucher, attendant to the birthing of some of the many books implanted deep within us all; keeper of secrets, I unfold the mystery of history and unveil the history of the Mystery—the crowning achievement, piece de resistance, the masterpiece of "His story."

I am a griot.

I am a teacher, and I teach because I love the teacher's task and find my richest prize in eyes that open and minds that ask; a speaker of truth—I speak the truth in love and create a space where the community of truth is practiced, leaving behind a legacy to affect eternity.

I am a griot.

And so much more, and by the grace of God I am what I am.

In case you didn't know, now you know. Just call me griot.

I am a griot. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Parker J. Palmer, 71.
- ² Robert Frost, 359.
- ³ William Vitek, np.
- ⁴ Joe P. Dunn, 1-2.
- ⁵ *ibid*, 1.

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