
**“Palabras” for Gathering Day
August 22, 2006**



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I enjoy summer because the change in the academic schedule offers an opportunity for extended reading. My reading this summer brought me into conversation with a variety of people. Some of these are North Park personalities. They include Leland Carlson’s history of the college written for the fiftieth anniversary of North Park in 1941. Another volume I read is Scott Erickson’s thesis on the life and work of David Nyvall, North Park’s founding president. I could comment on these, but we’ll leave that for another day. Of more interest to me today are three other authors—two poets and a librarian.

As summer began, I picked up a complementary copy of the *Georgetown Review* which had come to my desk nearly a year earlier. Here, a small college in Georgetown, Kentucky published an array of essays, short stories, and poems. Nearly a third of the volume’s content is dedicated to the theme of Writing on Vocation. I was attracted to several of these pieces.

One is a brief poem written by Ken Hekman, titled *The Art of Work*. Through a metaphor appropriate for the hot summer we’ve experienced, Hekman describes work as the opportunity to bring shade and coolness to the lives of others. He espouses that in our vocation we are artists, people who in our breath, our soul, our “ruach” as the Hebrews would say, bring life to those around us. And his poem ends on a note quite familiar to us at North Park where our mission is to “prepare students for lives of significance and service.” All this, and more, is expressed in a few very short lines. Hekman’s poem:

The Art of Work

I give myself to this, to *this*...
A passing shadow, barely felt
though un-mistakenly sent
to darken this corner
for a moment, to cast a little
coolness, a little shade – for a change.
With breath as a brush, I stroke
and stoke and sculpt something
that wasn’t there before,
leaving the world just a little better
than I found it.

As I join the community of North Park University I wonder whether I'll leave this place "just a little better than I found it." And what of my new neighborhood, and the city of Chicago, and the church where I'll worship, and the organizations in which I'll volunteer...when I leave will these worlds be better than when we first met?

Such a question, of course, is not mine alone. Will each of us leave this university "just a little better than we found it?" Will we—educators all of us—leave those students who enter our lives—in our classrooms, on our athletic fields, in our residence halls, in our offices—will these students leave our presence just a little better than when we first met them? As educators this is our collective task—"with breath as a brush, we stroke and stoke and sculpt something that wasn't there before, leaving [our students] just a little better than [we] found [them]."

A second poem is written by Ben Greer, titled quite simply, *Glue*. Here is a poem about our identity as teachers, as educators. Some years ago when I moved from spending much of my time in the classroom to spending more of my time in an administrative office, my faculty colleagues often asked me, "Do you miss teaching?" Over the years I've realized that this is not a question about what one does with one's time. Rather it is a question about who one is. The question is not, "Do you miss teaching?" Rather the question is, "Do you miss being a teacher?" What my colleagues didn't grasp was that even with my new responsibilities I am still a teacher, still an educator. As educators we find our very identity in teaching. Each day as we encounter students—as we walk into the classroom, the office, the residence hall, the chapel, the athletic center, for we teach in many places and through many roles—we know who we are, and it is good. We are people who daily paraphrase Rene Descartes and proclaim, "I teach, therefore I am."

Ben Greer's poem describes teaching as glue; it is what holds us together, what shapes our life, what satisfies our passions, what makes us whole.

Glue

May is my disintegration.
The classroom holds only light
and the gloom that summer brings:
empty buildings, empty life.

My very person shows the change—
ink of essays fades away
from my lessoned fingertips, while
my clothes deteriorate

to greasy t-shirts, riven pants.
Soon I do not bathe or brush;
it is too much to clean my nails
or cut my burgeoning beard.

A campus cop asks who I am.
"Tomatoes," I would like to say
but my woes he could never see,
nor the cure in my garden

planted in spring. Tall and sunny,
young and trim, the tomato vines
slow my grim dissolution.
I disappear among them,

until the last of summer haze
when my students start oozing in.
The young glue sticks me together,
and I am I again.

We are educators. Though we have different responsibilities in our individual roles—counseling, organizing, coaching, building, ministering, administering, teaching—it is our students who are the glue; they are what holds us together, what shapes our life, what satisfies our passions, what makes us whole.

For my birthday last year Linda gave me a couple of books, both by Nancy Pearl, a librarian in Seattle. The first book is titled *Book Lust*. The second is titled *More Book Lust*. Here is a librarian's response to the familiar question, "Have you read any good books lately." If you listen to NPR you have likely heard interviews in which she answers this question. And she has much to recommend in these two volumes. Most of us don't "read" bibliographies. We may study them, consult them, or otherwise peruse them, but we don't read them. Pearl's bibliographies are worth reading.

In the preface to the first volume Nancy Pearl writes briefly about reading. She comments:

Reading has always brought me pure joy. I read to encounter new worlds and new ways of looking at our own world. I read to enlarge my horizons, to gain wisdom, to experience beauty, to understand myself better, and for the pure wonderment of it all. I read and marvel over how writers use language in ways I never thought of. I read for company, for escape. Because I am incurably interested in the lives of other people, both friends and strangers, I read to meet myriad folks and enter their lives.

Whenever I begin reading a new book, I am embarking on a new, uncharted journey with an unmarked destination. I never know where a particular book will take me, toward what other books I will be led.

I'm intrigued by these thoughts for two reasons. First, it seems to me, what Pearl writes about reading is equally true about learning. It is easy to substitute the word "learn" in her paragraphs each time she uses the word "read." For example: "I learn to enlarge

my horizons, to gain wisdom, to experience beauty, to understand myself better, and for the pure wonderment of it all.” And this is our responsibility: to instill this same passion for learning in our students. Only then will they too marvel, and understand, and escape, and experience, and embark. What a great adventure this is to learn and to be teachers of learners.

Second, I am intrigued by Pearl’s notion that reading a book often leads to reading another book, and then another still. In like manner, learning often leads to another discovery, and then yet another. Learning is an adventure with an undisclosed destination.

As I thought of this earlier this summer I remembered an experience from my childhood.

One summer when I was a young adolescent I walked through the kitchen of our home on the way out of the house to play with friends. I took a detour past the cookie jar, and just as I was about out of the kitchen I heard my father’s voice. “Son,” he said, “where are you going?” His voice startled me as I hadn’t seen him in the room. I looked around quickly, didn’t see him still, and started to leave again. As he heard my footsteps my father again called out, “Son.” Was God speaking, I wondered! Then as I looked around the kitchen more carefully, I saw him. My father was on hands and knees with his head stuck into the counter under the kitchen sink.

He invited me to join him. There were two doors to the cabinet and if I stuck my head through the other one I could learn how to repair the plumbing. Of course this was less an invitation and more a directive, so I dropped down beside him and stuck my head into the cabinet under the sink.

He had taken the pipes apart, and after he cleaned the drain a bit further we started to reassemble the components of the sink’s underbelly. He asked me to hand him one of the pieces, and when I did so he responded, “No, I need the male.” I wasn’t sure what he meant but I grabbed another piece he might have been pointing to and gave it to him.

After few minutes he decided it was time for a break so we backed out of the cabinet and sat side-by-side on the floor. My father pulled out the various pieces we still had to reassemble—a couple of pipes, an elbow, a coupling, and two valves—and spread them on the floor in front of us. Then he asked me, “Do you know which pieces are male and which are female?” And with this simple question, my learning about how to repair a sink was transformed, by this wise teacher, into a lesson on human anatomy and a bit of sex education for this young lad. Both lessons my father taught me that day—how to repair a kitchen sink, and how the human body works—have served me well. Learning is an adventure with an undisclosed destination.

So we can paraphrase what Nancy Pearl writes:

Whenever I begin reading a new book (or taking a new course, or knowing a new student, or studying in a new place) I am embarking on a new, uncharted journey with an unmarked destination. I never know where a particular book (or course, or person, or experience) will take me, toward what other books (or courses, or people, or experiences) I will be led.

This is the adventure we embark on today; this is the adventure we will invite our students to join.

Linda and I are honored to work with you; I'm delighted by your dedication to our students, by your love of learning, by your diligence in teaching, by your devotion to God, by your commitment to Chicago, by your attention to scholarship. I look forward, as I know you do, to the return of our students so that through them we can discover again who we are and we can walk side-by-side with them as they explore who they are becoming.

To educate. To learn. This is a noble profession, an exalted vocation, a very good life.