**Reflections**

**College, Mr. High Score**

After years of avoiding it, doing many other things, whole different careers, let alone jobs, I was finally ready to go to College. Holland College, in Charlottetown P.E.I. had a unique, for the time, outcome based curriculum that was everything I wanted. I could work, for the most part, at my own pace and could test out on items early. Because of this I was able to complete 18 months of work in 6, and turn my Co-op into a contract, and then a company.

One day, after testing out on some electronic AC theory, I was walking with my instructor, a gruff, ex-military man, past the student lounge, where some of my cohort was playing pinball. “Who’s got high score?” my prof called in. “I do!” called back one of the students, happily. As we walked on, the Prof quietly asked me my score on the game. I had to admit that it was pretty low; I did not have much time to play. My prof stopped and put a hand on my shoulder. “That’s why you will graduate out of here early, and Mr. High Score back there has not done a test yet, he will likely not make it, he does not know why he is here.”

*I remember as a student how proud I was. Looking back now, as a professor myself, I understand my prof’s statement to me. I have to wonder if he ever had a conversation with Mr. High Score. Did he connect the students to the curriculum? Did he motivate them? Did he push enough, or was he just waiting to see what happened? Was this a case of self-fulfilling prophecy, grading inverse to pinball scores? I don’t think so. I would like to think that my prof communicated his concerns to the students. In retrospect though, he was known as being hard to approach.*

**I would not leave this to chance; I would make sure Mr. High Score knew why he was there.**

**A Masters later in Life**

Late in my life, and much to my surprise more than 10 years after my last go at formal education, I found myself enrolling in a Master’s program. This was a surprise to me, because if you had asked me a few years earlier, I would say “No, I have no interest” and “All I need now I will obtain through industry certifications”. I had no motivation to put myself through either the expense of more formal education, or the work that it would involve.

Things changed. First, the system (college) was starting to look for higher academic credentials, and if I wished mobility in the system, I would have to do something. Second, my wife, Laura, was interested in continuing her education, and wanted me along for the ride.

This started me looking for a program that would interest, challenge and advance both of us in our fields, not just in education, but in technology. We selected University of Liverpool in the U.K. for a few reasons. One, they had a masters in IT Security, one of the first to have such. Second, it ranked well worldwide, and both Laura and I wanted an international education that would be well recognised.

We jumped in, a year and a half in courses, and nine months of dissertation. Two to three hours every night in our study, reading and writing, challenging each other to stretch and do better, competing against ourselves.

*This was a major factor in my success, the scheduled routine. In my first course at the university, one that was not for credit, but required, they emphasized this, as did my Student Support Manager. I resented it a bit at the time, but now think that the repeated emphasis on “schedule a regular time” was well thought out. I understand that, even at that level (Masters) they still felt that they needed to teach how to learn.*

**We have to teach the students more than just the subject, we have to teach them how to learn.**

At times it was work, and we would wonder why we were putting ourselves through it. Then we would talk about graduation, about how this would lead us along the path to our goals, and it wasn’t quite so much work anymore.

*In retrospect, motivation was what got me through my Masters. Having a goal, and keeping my focus on it was the key to my success, more than any other single factor.*

**Keep motivating your students, they might all have different reasons to be there, but they all need a reason.**

Both Laura and I graduated with Distinction. We were two of only four to do so, out of a graduating class of nineteen. Many of our classmates fell by the wayside.

**Part 2: My Work Narrative**

**The School of Life**

To begin this story, you should understand that at the end of high school, I was not ready to continue my formal education. I wanted to “live”, and have some “real life experience” (as I saw it then), and had no patience for an education that I felt was delivered too slowly, and in too repetitive a manner.

By the age of 20, I managed a few gas stations, and had approximately 30 people working for me. Got bored, and switched to being a mechanic’s apprentice. Got bored, and switched to being the youngest provincial supervisor Burns Security ever had. Got bored (getting a theme here?) and became a farrier, then a dairy lab technician, then started my career in IT (I had been avoiding IT as it was my father’s line of work). I worked for a local computer company, went to college, then started my own company.

I worked for the federal government, contracted for the NRC (National Research Council) , worked for IBM, ExecuTrain (training company), Tridel (condos), the Canadian Cancer Society, and then, finally, Centennial then Durham Colleges.

A long string, and selecting one or two, and then one or two meaningful stories, was at first a daunting task. To help select, I went through some stories in my head, and chose those that met two criteria. 1. That it be a story that I have retold and would likely retell again. It must mean something to me then right? 2. It must mark for me a vector change.

I use the term vector, for those who are unfamiliar with the term, by its mathematical or physics definition,” a quantity having direction as well as magnitude, esp. as determining the position of one point in space relative to another.” (Google definition)

This means then, that the story marks a point where I either changed direction, or sped up or slowed down. Either way, it must mark a change in my life.

**The Federal Government, Nice place to visit…**

Working for ACOA, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency, was at first my Co-op placement in College, and then my first contract job as a newly minted Computer Technician.

My first day, walking in, I was presented with a key to the server room, admin passwords, told “good luck” and then the team that installed the new facility left the province to go set up another. If you need us, you can get hold of us, I was told, then, but not for three weeks; we’ll all be out of contact till next month.

I lived in that server room for two weeks, having pizza delivered, and avoiding human contact as I learned as much as I could, as quick as I could. I did not call my support in three weeks. In fact, two months in, I contacted them to offer to help solve a problem that they had broadcast a need for assistance for, which I had solved in those original three weeks.

*I lived for the challenge and the chance to grow.* *In reflection, I now also realize that I reveled in the fact that I was trusted to solve my own problems, though I had support, I was expected to do for myself first.*

*In teaching I seek to challenge my students. They are at their best when they must rise to the challenge. When I start a new lab, I get them started, then I leave the room for a while. I find when I do this, all the little questions and problems are solved by the time I get back.*

**Give Students the time and the opportunity to solve their problems.**

I left ACOA after the system had been stable for over a year, and I realized that I was spending most of my time on a tennis court with a pager on. There was no more challenge, and little chance to grow.

**The Cancer Society Burned Out.**

I loved working for the Cancer Society. I was proud to work for such an organization, and with some of the best, most dedicated people I had ever met. As Network and Telecom Analyst, I looked after the Provincial office in Toronto, 7 regional offices in Cancer Centers across Ontario, and over 60 smaller offices spread across small towns in Ontario. I worked with one other IT person, and before I left, had hired a help desk support person. When I left, they hired (within the year) 3 people to replace me.

I was working 12 to 14 hours a day, 6 to 7 days a week. I loved the work, there was always something to do, always another project coming down the pipe, always fires to put out. This met my need to be needed, to be challenged, and to grow.

But I was getting tired, and I could see no sign of a break. I had just finished a major Exchange (email) roll out, and was informed that a new database and accounting project would be starting. They “might” be able to get me help (they did get my helpdesk person) but the workload would be steady for another 18 months.

At that time, I was approached by Centennial to teach. The dean and chair came to my office at the Society. I don’t even know how they found me, but they asked for me by name, and made an offer, and it included summers off!

I was exhausted. I had not had a vacation in years, and, if I stayed, I would have to commit to the end of the next project. I could not start and not finish. I loved the job, loved the people, but for everyone, there comes a point where it is too much.

*For everyone, there comes a point where it is too much. In retrospect, I wonder if my manager at the Society saw that I needed to stop. If he reached out and got me my job at Centennial? I don’t know, but it is possible. As much as one might love what they do, if they are given too much, they will respond. The quality of their work, or their life, may drop off. Or they may opt to just stop, or change. We as faculty must always watch for the signs that a student is being over worked and should respond, before they do.*

**If you see the quality of a students work drop, or their attitude change for the worse in class, question it!**