

## *Reflections of a Sub-salutatorian*

**Jack Troy**

**D**r. Kepple, colleagues, fellow learners, and visitors. I'm properly honored to receive the Beachley Award and grateful to those who supported my selection. It's a bit like winning a lottery for which no tickets are sold, and is perfectly in keeping for someone like me who feels enormously lucky to be exactly where I am, standing at a podium on a beautiful 20-acre campus, the object of 15 minutes of enforced attention by hundreds of eyes, in the lingering hours of my 67th year just a few days away from attaining the enduring rank of Professor Demeritus, here in a building adjacent to the marvelous new Taj Mahalbritter.

Being here is also a source of great bemusement to me. This is the 50th year of my graduation from Wyomissing High School, where I was truly the "sub-salutatorian" not, mind you, the "sub-valedictorian," or third from last in class rank, but the upside-down also-ran, the almost-last, the one "probably least likely to...name almost any accomplishment," such as, "Teach my colleague Dr. Richard Hark how to make pots at Juniata College," where I knew better than to apply for admission in 1956.

So what miracles intervened? The 20th century, like this one,

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*Spring Awards Convocation Address, May 2, 2006, by the recipient of the Beachley Award for Distinguished Teaching*

pre-dated brain transplants, so that's out as an explanation. No I.Q.-enhancement drugs or programs were available. But certain key events; moments, even, seem, in retrospect, to have shaped my future. So bear with me in sharing some reflections. My point is to suggest that we acknowledge our defining moments by heeding the poet Jane Hirschfield's observations: "Everything changes. Everything is connected. Pay attention. No matter where you are in class rank, you are in a class by yourself because no one else has lived your life, and every life is a source of mitochondrial originality otherwise known as consciousness."<sup>1</sup>

I know that I am right here today because I hearkened to a faint inkling on a cold, rainy February morning at West Chester State Teachers College in 1958, when, alphabetically situated with the Ts, in a gymnasium with 120 other male phys. ed. majors wearing shoes with clickers on the toes and stretchy blue pants tugged down by straps under our arches, I suddenly stopped my tap-dancing routine while the woman at the piano continued playing, "The Dark-town Strutters Ball," and a question occurred to me: "What are you doing with your life?" I answered "Yes. What am I doing with my life?" and then turned and went AWOL/ASAP to the locker room, where for the last time I took off the shoes with the clickers on the toes, and in 15 minutes, conjoining destiny and will, became an English major.

That same winter, it was announced that tryouts were to be held for the play, "Inherit the Wind," about the Scopes trial in 1925, in Dayton, Tennessee. A born-again wallflower, I waited outside the tryout room, and after the last person left I entered, nervously. The director pointed at me and said, "You! See that chair in the middle of the room? You're a Nazi storm trooper. The man in that chair is a suspected spy with important information. Question him without using any words!" I instantly became a mime, expressively beat up on the alleged spy, and then read some lines from the play. The next day I was given the role of one of the leads, Drummond, defense attorney for the biology teacher who dared teach Darwin's theory of evolution. When, imaginatively, I became someone else onstage, I could never quite go back to being the same person I was before the experience; I had learned what George Burns observed: "The most important thing in acting is honesty. If you can fake that, you've got it made." This is why it's

silly to think there is only one virginity in life. There are really many virginities, many passages between levels of experience. A favorite writer, E. B. White, put it this way, “I discovered, though, that once having given a pig an enema, there is no going back, no chance of assuming one of life’s more stereotyped roles.”<sup>2</sup>

Ultimately, because of a single class discussion during student teaching about W. Somerset Maugham’s *The Moon and Sixpence*—a fictional life of the painter Gauguin—I became an English teacher who learned to make pottery, and from there went on to become the only faculty member at Juniata who for 39 years has taught a subject in which I hold no degree, which seems about as liberal as the arts can get. It has occurred to me that my students might have demanded a reduced rate for taking my classes, but it’s too late now; the duping is done.

Eventually I realized I’d better stop directing the freshman composition program and teaching American literature to concentrate on ceramics. It was about the time when my seminar in Emerson and Thoreau took a field trip to Walden Pond, and two carloads of us toasted the teetotalers, Ralph and Henry, read our favorite passages from Walden, and rolled out our sleeping bags on sacred literary ground not yet off limits to pilgrims such as us. Someone pointed out the similarities in Thoreau’s observation, “We are always being born in one life and dying in another,” and Bob Dylan’s line, “He not busy being born is busy dying.”<sup>3</sup>

About then I developed a personal theory of economics, and decided to teach part-time. Time seemed a superior variety of currency to money. While a dollar’s value is always determined by nebulous and debatable forces outside us, the worth of a day, an hour, or a few minutes can be ours alone. Teaching part-time amounted to giving me a raise by taking a pay cut. Making pots to sell was one option; working on a poem no one would ever pay a penny for was another. Each was an investment of time; not “time spent,” and that made the expression, “*Zeit ist gelt*” (“time is money”) irrelevant. Just as important, a sedentary professorial life held no appeal; today it seems even more evident that part of the national purpose is to make a living sitting at a desk.

Not everyone was so lucky to have as a patron Dr. Donald Rockwell, academic dean at the time, who personally—and on the sly—bought our first potter’s wheels and funded setting up

Juniata's first studio just because he thought it was a good idea. My friend had gone to a bank to borrow money for a pottery studio and the loan officer responded predictably: "Ceramics must be a fascinating avocation, but I'm afraid we couldn't lend money to support it." That's when the potter took from his coat a one-pound ball of clay in a plastic bag, set it on the desk, and said, "This ball of clay cost less than a penny. In two minutes I can make it into a mug that will sell for fifteen dollars." The banker looked at the clay and looked at my friend, who by this time had taken a beautiful mug from his other pocket and set it beside the plastic bag, clinching the loan and launching his career.

One Sunday afternoon in the early '70s, one of my students, Bob Burruss, and I were driving up Mifflin Street in my 1951 Ford pickup. We had just put in a couple of hours mixing clay in downtown Huntingdon, where Juniata owned a small building for clay storage and recycling. We had mixed nearly a thousand pounds and were delivering it to the basement of Carnegie building for the next week's ceramics classes. I pulled over when a flashing red light appeared in the mirror. "Out of the truck, both of you," commanded a loud voice through a bull-horn. Bob and I got out as residents began appearing to view the proceedings. "Put your hands on the hood," the officer directed. He then got out of the cruiser, approached us from behind, and frisked us for weapons, bongos, and hookahs. By this time most homes on the block had at least one representative on their porch or sidewalk to see what would happen next. Bob's hair was long, and fell forward past the sides of his face as he straight-armed the truck's hood. He wouldn't have been permitted to roller-skate at the local rink, where a sentry at the door refused entrance to any young man whose hair touched his shirt collar. We continued to hold our positions on either side of the truck, as if to see who could push it over.

Speaking into his radio, the policeman notified the person in charge at the station: "I've apprehended a couple of hippie-type individuals in the 1200 block of Mifflin Street. They have some garbage cans in their truck and say they are transporting clay." "Well?" came the loud reply from the radio, "Who are they?" "One's named Troy." "Jack Troy?" boomed the voice over the radio. "Doesn't he make the pottery?" Reading my driver's license, the officer replied, "Yea. Jack Troy." "Well, if he says it's clay, it must be

clay. Just let 'em go.” “Chief says you can go ahead,” the officer told us, handing over my license.

“That was a close one, Jack,” Bob said as we continued up the street. “We might have had to unload all that clay so he could look for the drugs he hoped we’d hidden in those garbage cans.” A few years ago I made breakfast for Dr. Bob Burruss, currently a geologist with the US Geological Society in Washington—someone who still enjoys working with clay. His hair is shorter now than that of most police officers in Huntingdon.

Twenty-some years ago one of our students, seemingly with little effort, completed his degree requirements in three years and headed for dental school. Imagine his surprise when he was told by an official that while his academic credentials were impeccable and impressive, he hadn’t taken any hands-on classes. He might hurt himself with a drill. “The practice of dentistry is a fictile activity.” He was asked, “Do you know what fictile means?” “No.” It was suggested that he return to Juniata and take ceramics, so he showed up in my intro class a little disoriented. “Do you know what fictile means?” he asked. “Sure,” I said. “That’s the word Thoreau uses in *Walden* to describe the potter’s art.” “Well, I’m here to get fictile,” he said. He proved a dexterous adept, and is probably up to his second knuckles at this very moment, in the body cavity of his choice.

As my students who didn’t drop the class have discovered, investing energy and spirit in a simple cup to drink from can be a profound metaphor: all your life we’ve been drinking from other people’s cups, and in this small gesture with a handful of earth, we alter the metaphor in a kinetic celebration. This is how I commemorated that act:

### Conversions (for my students)

This winter the birds ate nearly sixty pounds of suet.  
Most days I’ve watched them peck  
and then convert a phantom steer’s insides to flight, to feathered  
warmth a winter’s night could not snuff out.  
Then I drove to class and showed you  
how to shape energy with a potter’s wheel.

Torquing our planet's flesh, lump after lump, into cups and bowls by the dozens, we gave them once and forever, form, color, fire-memory.

Can you feel in a teacup's heat  
that friction of change?

The combustion of one thing becoming another?

That answerable question uniting the tactile with the imagined, brings me to a favorite unanswerable question: we can't help wondering if the percentage of any given human generation that truly loves what they do in daily life has always been the same or if that fraction is growing or shrinking over time. Being comfortable with ambiguities like this is part of the terrain of making a pot, or poem, or catching a pesky enzyme dead to rights. Working with unknowns in art or science makes playing video games seem like non-sexual masturbation. Why? Because rather than submitting to someone else's program, no matter how compelling, art-making and science-delving both embody discovery, and are invitations to dance with both passion and discipline; become friends with the original, creative part of ourselves, while keeping our imaginations alive.

Do this with me now: Imagine a bird with a wide distribution in the United States. Call it a robin. The first one sang this morning at dawn on the coast of northeast Maine. By the time its relative sang in Huntingdon, robins had documented the passage of light in each county in every state between Maine and Pennsylvania, and in time their song-lines extended to Washington's Olympic Peninsula, where they're singing right now. This happens every spring and summer day, but we hear only a tiny part of the miracle; the rest we have to imagine. As Carl Sagan put it, "Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known."<sup>4</sup>

To go questing in art and science is to seek and grasp a thread William Stafford describes in his poem:

### The Way It Is

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change.

People wonder about what you are pursuing.

You have to explain about the thread.  
But it is hard for others to see.  
While you hold it you can't get lost.  
Tragedies happen; people get hurt  
or die; and you suffer and get old.  
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.  
You don't ever let go of that thread.<sup>5</sup>

Thank you.



#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Jane Hirschfield, as cited by Joni Doherty, "Poetry as the Practice of Attention," in *Mountain Record: The Zen Practitioner's Journal* (Mt. Tremper, NY: Zen Mountain Monastery, 2006), 84.
- <sup>2</sup> E. B. White, "Death of a Pig," in *The Second Tree from the Corner* (New York: Harper and Row, Inc., 1965), 234.
- <sup>3</sup> Bob Dylan, "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," in *Bringing It All Back Home* (1965).
- <sup>4</sup> Carl Sagan, "Literary and Historical Notes," from *The Writer's Almanac*, hosted by Garrison Keillor, American Public Media, November 9, 2004.
- <sup>5</sup> William Stafford, "The Way It Is," in *The Way It Is, New and Selected Poems* (St. Paul, MN: Stafford Graywolf Press, 1999), 42.