

Building on the Past: A Short Reflection on Starting Out, Ending Up, and Hoping Still

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I was an undergraduate student in Faculty of Education in the 1970s, a time during which the halls of what is now the G.A. Hickman building bustled with throngs of students. We were wall-to-wall, and all the office doors were open, to our gaze if not our entry. Many of us had come in from very small 'outport' communities that, back then, were thriving, not dying. We were among those small few from every community who went to university, which usually meant MUN. And while St. John's, or 'town', as we called it, offered all kinds of temptations and we were free to 'run wild like Billy goats', as our parents might say, come weekends or holidays, we couldn't wait to get back home. Home was where the real action was - among friends and families and at the times that came from a gathering of both that outmatched any dance at Paton College or the Thompson Student Centre. Yet, little noticed by us then, each return became a measure of distance and change - in our communities and ourselves.

But we had left home and all it meant to study teaching - a good career choice back then and one that was imaginable. There were teachers in every community. You either could or could not see yourself as one. If you could, you found yourself here, in the Faculty of Education. We were young beyond years. We carried ourselves loose and carefree and wore long hair, Indian cotton tops and blue jeans, and we smelled of a mix of marijuana and patchouli oil. We were concerned with fairness and one another. We had no great sense of being 'less than' in any larger scheme of things. Yes, there were 'the townies' and 'the baywops', but in that rivalry each side won as we came together to learn and to love. More often our differences helped to build resilience rather than defeat. Problems with self-esteem were, well, not problems. That concept had not yet become fashionable here, which is not to say that any one of us was unmarked by the very struggles of being and living.

In our classes, no one said much, when we bothered to go, with the exception of a few who most of saw as taking themselves far too seriously. We listened and wrote and smoked cigarettes and couldn't wait for it all to be over to go to the Breezeway Bar or Big Bens. While we didn't really get to know our professors, there was always a sense that they knew who we were even if they did not care what we were doing. In that way, it was like a small community. Someone always had their eye on you and, if push came to shove, they had your back, too. Our professors were a cast of characters, warm or cruel or indifferent or broken, just like everyone else we saw day in and day out in the home communities we had left. But our professors were there and that seemed important, then. Their presence was an anchor that provided some sense of a home away from home.

There were two rooms in the Faculty of Education that we all loved. The cafeteria on the fifth floor was as essential to our lives as the Breezeway Bar. The women who staffed it knew it and us didn't matter if, on occasion, we were a dime or two short the price of a coffee; they would top up the difference. It was a place you could come to sit, to read, to finish an assignment or to study people, especially professors. Did they know they were being studied? We were the unofficial ethnographers of the Faculty. We were like television viewers watching a character in some unfolding drama, trying to figure out their motives, actions and relationships. We watched longingly, wanting to be them and, perhaps, to replace them. It is the arrogance of the young to think this way.

The second room was the Curriculum Materials Centre. Regardless of how cold it may have felt elsewhere, it was always warm and inviting there. All those books and the stories of inspiration and optimism they contained overwhelmed my senses. And the women who stacked the shelves, signed out our books, and answered our questions with an enthusiasm that left you feeling smart and important and accepted were among the most loving and caring you could meet. It was possible to feel safe and accepted. We studied under their watch and felt how they valued us and believed in what we were doing. Of course, they weren't under any illusions about our less studious sides; many of them were mothers, too, and they knew how to measure and balance and to see into the soul of people.

We competed at sports or for boyfriends or girlfriends, but not for grades. It seemed there was little fuss about them, at all. As long as we passed, could come back the next semester, and continue toward graduation - that was all that mattered. We studied together, shared notes, and helped one another in whatever ways we could. That was what you did. Of course we also fought about differences that seemed big then and are hardly memorable now. I think we had perspective and we had community. We belonged with someone if not everyone, and we were happy. We fell in love, put our work aside, got hurt, and tried to regroup to get through exams, heartbroken and not. We moved on. It was the time of our lives.

By the early 1980s, some of us began the second round, a return, this time for graduate study. By then we had lived in other communities as teachers and learned some of what it meant to be at the front of the room and all that it entailed. We knew a little of what it was like to be 'out on our own' in a world unfolding in broad strokes and movements. A realization of what we did not know sent many of us back to school again, more humble and self-aware now. We worked harder and played, too, in that liminal space a graduate student occupies. Lines were blurred and we found ourselves drinking and dancing with the same professors we had watched from afar as undergraduates. Those were heady days of theory, desire, and possibility. Ideas came with us over dinners and drinks, on drives, and in casual conversations. The world got larger and, at the same time, sadder. Our minds and bodies were falling into places we had not imagined.

Fast forward twenty years and I have found my way back to the Faculty of Education, now as a professor who had already spent many years 'away', elsewhere. The return was a dream-come-true, to work in a place committed to this place, its people, and an education for and of them. The day of the job interview I walked into the building and that smell that had not ever left my nostrils, the deep familiarity of a place that is part of your molecular structure. Other things were less familiar although some of those subjects of my character studies of years ago remained, still.

It is never easy to change position in relation to our ideals. It is disorienting and, often, disappointing. It is not only that 'things change' but that we do, as well. The sands shift in all directions and we are adrift, left to long for something lost and to hope for something not yet. And even if, at the mercy of memory, nothing feels real anymore, returns offer their own opportunity for reflection.

As a young undergraduate student, the thought that this place was a lonely one would not have occurred to me. But I see now it is a lonely place. Where is everyone? Fewer students gather fewer times. They hang out online, together with no one and not really anywhere. And why is it so

rare to see professors sitting and talking to one another outside a scheduled meeting? I wonder when it changed? Was it like an event - sudden and irreversible? Or was it like a disease - slow moving and subcutaneous?

Regardless of what happened or how, things are different now. It is not the place where I studied but it is the place where I work. And as I watch the remaining representatives of that time continue to toil, I want to remember what it is they built here with others, and inside me, too. I want to be thankful for the community that awaited me when I first came here as a student, the one that nurtured my ill-formed dreams and that provided a loving space in which I could learn and grow.

The presentism that haunts so many things erases so much, yet it seems foolhardy to forget that for decades before now there were those who forged out something important and worthwhile, on which many built and continue to build. As we try to find our way forward in what are, at best, uncertain educational times, we might do well to ponder and to honour the contributions that framed this very specific response to a people and place. In presentism there is often smugness, an assured belief that we have progressed, improved, bettered. I guess it depends on that place in the pew again, and the beliefs and values you honour as you sit there.

Things change. But the need for community does not. The gift of community, belonging, and acceptance that enveloped me in those early days as a student remain desirable features of a Faculty committed to moving forward in communion with all its constituents. It is never too late to build such relationships, if we make them our priorities. And a home away from home as a place to work, grow and relate will never be an outdated notion. Now, as new and younger colleagues arrive and gather together in their newness, I rejoice that some other kinds of community are emerging.

Careers aside, what matters most is how we feel in these hallways of this building, at times when we think no one is looking, and how we feel heard, even when we are not saying much aloud at all. That's the kind of place where I studied and learned; it is still the kind of place where I want to work and teach. Looking back may offer some insight into what direction to dream. In the words of Jean Vanier, "Maybe the world will be transformed when we learn to have fun together. I don't mean to suggest that we don't talk about serious things. But maybe what our world needs more than anything are communities where we celebrate life together and become a sign of hope for our world. Maybe we need signs that it is possible to love each other". Signs by which to learn and to live.

Reference

Hauerwas, S. & Vanier, J. (2008). *Living gently in a violent world*. Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press.