

Mentor

Guiding the Journey of Adult Learners

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Chapter One: First Shards

The Search for Meaning as a Motive for Learning

"What is education? I should suppose that education was the curriculum one had to run through in order to catch up with oneself." -Soren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling

We are all adult learners. Most of us have learned a good deal more out of school than in it. We have learned from our families, our work, our friends. We have learned from problems resolved and tasks achieved, but also from mistakes confronted and illusions unmasked. Intentionally or not, we have learned from the dilemmas our lives hand us daily.

Some of what we have learned is trivial; some has changed our lives forever. Much of the time, learning is a joy, especially when it meets a clearly felt need, takes us toward some destination, or helps us make sense of something formerly obscure. But sometimes it brings pain, and we struggle mightily not to see the obvious. There are few among us who have not wondered at such times why it was that the more we learned the less we knew, where our lives were taking us, and whether it was all worth it.

Our students are no different. Most have sacrificed a good deal to return to school. Education is important for them, not simply because they see it as a ticket to a better life but because in some more profound sense, they hope it helps them make sense of lives whose fabric of meaning has grown frayed. For a multitude of reasons, they seldom lead with this revelation; some have yet to realize it. Fewer still see the erosion of meaning in their lives as a normal process, part of a lifetime of growing up. Yet both recent research and timeless insight have made it clear that our lives do not simply level off after the age of eighteen (Knox, 1977; Cross, 1981; Heath, 1991; Merriam and Caffarella, 1991; Tennant and Pogson, 1995). We continue to grow and change. What was once trivial can turn suddenly monumental, and what earlier appeared essential now seems unimportant. Women who for years sacrificed themselves for their families suddenly declare "It's Mom's turn" and replace the cookware on the kitchen table with textbooks; and men who were locked into the upward struggle for money and prestige may all at once turn inward, wondering what it all means.

A good education can help people understand these changes; indeed, it may play a part in bringing them about. A good education tends to our deepest longings, enriches them, nourishes the questions from which grow the tentative answers that, in turn, sow fresh questions about what really matters. As teachers, we do vital work in the lives of our growing students. This book is an attempt to portray students and teachers at work, to demonstrate how we can discuss important matters together so that our students can regain the courage, insight, and passion they need to move ahead in their lives more fully, to weave and reweave the fabric of meaning more richly and strongly.

As I began writing this book, I struggled with the tension between writing a "scholarly" work on the one hand and something with broader appeal on the other. Gradually I came

to see that what I wanted most was to tell a good story, to engender good conversation. I have tried to do that, and because I am writing about what I do, I have attempted to remain a visible storyteller. For me, being a teacher is more art than science. I am uneasy with claims to an "objectivity" that I doubt exists. Perhaps that is why I have found the metaphor of a journey to be particularly useful for understanding what my students and I are going through. For although journeys differ for each of us, like education, they do have direction, they have a common syntax, and we can mark our progress by the passing signposts. In their form itself lies their meaning. Thus, although some of what happens between teacher and student has about it the quality of magic, by casting our two protagonists as pilgrim and guide we can learn much about that dark and fertile art. The question for us as teachers is not whether but how we influence our students. It is a question about a relationship: Where are our students going, and who are we for them in their journey?

This question underlies most of the book. In this chapter, I try to illustrate why it became so important for me and why I believe it to be central for all of us who are struggling to construct an education of care. So, let me invite you along on a short journey to eavesdrop on a conversation between Emerald and me. She was one of twenty returning adult students I was working with as mentor for an external degree program several years back. My job was to guide them along the misty and often confusing pathways through higher education. I would help people decide what they wanted to learn, explain the program requirements, and work with them to select courses or design independent studies that would take them to their goal. Once under way, it was my job to provide moral and academic support, which often involved conversations like this one.

When the Thunder Comes

The ski trails on the side of Mt. Mansfield were etched white against the blue of the horizon as the car glided around the corner, a bit fast for the icy conditions. It was one of those perfect winter days, utterly clear but still below zero in midmorning. Glittering flakes of frozen air drifted in the sunlight as a careful of skiers heading for the mountain passed me in the opposite direction, eager no doubt to play in the fresh powder of yesterday's storm. Days like today are the stuff of postcards, I thought to myself, everything in its Sunday best. Yet there's something glossy and unreal about the countryside in winter. People who live here know what's under the snow, and one needn't drive far off the main roads to see the trailers and the shacks, the shattered doors and the torn polyethylene covering windows, to know that Vermont Life is a magazine intended mostly for export.

I turned north outside of Hardwick and headed into the heart of the Northeast Kingdom, where I live and work. So named some years ago by Sen. George Aiken in recognition of the three northeastern counties' determined insularity, the region is Vermont's poorest and probably harbors most of what's left of a way of life earlier called Yankee, now outdated and overromanticized. The barn, once our predominant architecture, has been largely replaced by the trailer, topped-as soon as the owner can afford it-by a roof pitched against the cold.

The road and the frozen river danced together as I glided past overgrown pastures scored from time to time with the tracks of snowmobiles. Just beyond a half-buried garage sale sign-the tip of our underground economy's iceberg-the Come & Eat roadhouse peered over the stacks of snow. I slowed down and pulled into the newly scraped lot beside a huge semi loaded with pulp.

The steam swirled around me as I swung through the door, struck by the blast of warm

air redolent of coffee and bacon fat, gravy and canned string beans. The place was nearly empty save for a couple of men layered in chocolate rags, huddled over coffee cups and cigarettes. They must belong to the truck, I thought, as I looked for Emerald. I spotted her nestled in the next-to-last booth, nodded, and peeled off my parka as I made my way to join her.

Widowed after a brief marriage some years ago, Emerald returned to her hometown; she has worked here ever since as a bookkeeper in her brother's small sawmill. Now in her mid-thirties, she dresses softly and with incongruous class, bats her eyelids with accomplishment. Seemingly shy, she scarcely opens her mouth in group meetings; even outside, she volunteers little. Yet when she does speak, she does so with near-perfect certainty, ending her sentences in the air as if to say, "Isn't it obvious?"

A year ago she graduated from the local community college and entered the external degree program to study for a degree in business management. The program requirements were broad and flexible, allowing her to take courses at a number of different institutions but specifying a certain number of liberal studies as well. The task of the mentor was to help her design a program that met both her needs and the program's expectations. Like many adults, Emerald began her studies with courses directly relevant to her work: accounting, office management, computers. As her adviser, I chose not to resist that, for older students are generally much clearer about what they're doing in college than their younger counterparts, and it doesn't do to thwart their firm intentions—at least not at first. But the time came for Emerald to plan her program more comprehensively. We had arranged this meeting to discuss it.

From a folder on the seat beside her, Emerald removed a neatly typed sheet of paper and slid it across the table toward me. The brief narrative noted that her objective was to attain a degree in business management; her long-term goal was to become a CPA. Beneath the narrative was written:

"Liberal arts will be useful to offset patterns of rigidity prevalent in my main objective: achieving a balance in education. I realize that all numbers and heavy concentration in one single area with no balancing influence is apt to lead to undesirable personality maladjustments and mental introversion. Liberal arts is and has been my mode of relaxation."

Then came a list of the studies she planned to undertake during the next six semesters. Her intention was to study two at a time—a full load when combined with a normal workday. The list was fascinating. Next term, she planned to combine budgeting with the Old Testament, then data processing and archeology, business law and poetry, insurance and dance. Balance, indeed, I thought to myself as I scanned the list. The dichotomy was relentless, but I could discern no pattern beyond that. Why those subjects? Why that order? It baffled and fascinated me at once. What did this woman want for herself? Or, I wondered, is this for herself at all? Then I noticed her one liberal study course thus far—a course on death and dying she took last term. How could I have forgotten? Something about her mouth as she described her widowhood during an earlier meeting had prompted me to suggest that she take it. I decided to begin there.

"So. How was that death and dying course?"

"Oh, fine," she replied, sealing the statement with a tight smile, inviting more but offering nothing. She's going to make me work, I thought. Off balance already, but the game begun, I played another card.

"Fine"? How do you mean that? What was good about it?"

"Oh, we learned a lot of useful stuff." Silent again, but there was an opening.

"Like?"

"Oh, you know. If somebody dies on the job, what you have to do. How morgues work, you know. We had an interesting trip to the morgue."

How morgues work? That escaped me. This fragile, tough widow whose lip trembles at a seven-year-old memory, takes a death and dying course and learns nothing but how morgues work? I tried to mask my disbelief and moved to check out what seemed obvious.

"Besides that-besides the trip and the practical stuff-did you get anything out of the course of value to you?" Palms toward her, I underlined "value" with empty hands. I wanted her to know that I knew, without either of us having to acknowledge it. "Of value?" She caught my eye for an instant, then looked down at her own hands, half-folded in her lap. "Oh, some personal stuff." She paused a moment, then looked back up. Her eyes were moist, but she wouldn't give in. "Some people in the course had a lot of grieving to do." Then quickly, "But I just don't agree with that. I mean you have to move ahead. That's what I believe. You can't look back. I guess I learned that from my father. You have to put the past behind you and move ahead."

She held my eye doggedly while she spoke, testing herself. In the end, she passed. She was not about to give me that much, and I was not at all sure I wanted it. Besides, we each knew enough for now. We backed down.

"Move ahead," I said as I leaned back. "What's that mean for you? Where are you headed?"

Her face broke into a smile and she turned, looking out the frosted window. Then, after a moment, "Oh, be more myself, I guess."

"How's that?"

"Oh, you know, not getting jerked around so much by other people, not always worrying about what they think of me."

I smiled at the familiarity of her sentiment. "Is there something wrong with that?" The question was clearly loaded, and she responded with a fire I hadn't seen before.

"Would you believe my brother had a fit when he saw that stuff?" she burst out, pointing to the degree plan. "He thinks I shouldn't study anything but what I need to run his stupid business!"

So she was on to her own tricks: even as she felt the heat of her brother's expectations, she resented them. Clearly, there was an Emerald inside this woman who wanted to be her own person. That puzzling dichotomy, that struggle over the meaning of "value"-was it the echo of an inner conversation between an old and a new Emerald? It often seemed that the educational worth of a given subject was inversely related to its apparent usefulness. Perhaps the new Emerald was crying out for something that would allow her to escape from the ordinary, practical "realities" of a life grown absurd.

Suddenly the waitress was above us, wanting to know what we wanted. We ordered coffee and smiled her away; I lounged back into the corner of the booth, wondering whether to go with Emerald's emotions or pursue my hunch. Plates clattered in the kitchen. I decided on the latter.

"Look, Emerald, just suppose you could have all the money and all the time you needed to learn about anything in the world you wanted. No need to learn a job skill, no need to be practical. Just to go after a burning curiosity. What would you want to learn?"

"Religion."

It came back so quickly I was thrown again. But it was perfect.

"Ah, so that's what the Old Testament next fall is about?"

"Yes." (Isn't it obvious?)

"Well, what ... what, exactly, does religion mean for you? I mean, it seems so far from accounting and numbers and all that."

"Yes. That's what I like about it. It's so different from what I do all day long. I like to come home and do something completely different."

That made sense to me. After a long day in the left brain, we need to change sides. But somehow something wasn't quite right yet. I was beginning to get a sense of what the two parts were, of where they rested, but what linked those "completely different" studies? And where was Emerald in all this? I still needed a connection.

"What is it about the Old Testament or archeology-or death and dying-that is so different from accounting?" I tossed in that last, fingers crossed. But maybe she would connect it for us.

"Well," she replied, flicking glances at me like a chickadee, cautious but not at all frightened, "I want to learn how it all began."

"And you feel you can learn the answers by studying those subjects?" I was not at all sure where she was going with this. She was beyond the point of thinking she could find the meaning of life by looking it up in the dictionary. Yet she did seem to think The Answers were out there, that if she could just study enough, read the right books, get the right information, she would find them. Was that what she wanted?

"Well, archeology will give a kind of scientific answer, and the Old Testament course will give religion...." She broke off and looked at me with a question. "Does that make sense?" Evidently it didn't quite, to her.

I replied that I understood her uncertainty, but I still needed to clarify something. Was this quest no more than a counterpoint to accounting? I floundered for the question, then blurted it out.

"So there you sit, in your stuffy little office day after day with your numbers-your pluses and your minuses, your rights and your wrongs, your world of certainties-and suddenly you find yourself staring out the window at a cloud and asking, 'Is this all there is?' Is that what your quest is about?"

Her smile this time seemed almost a relief to her. She reined it in quickly, but the acknowledgment was there-as though it had all been a guessing game and I finally got it.

"What do you really want to know?" I asked her softly. And she began to talk.

"Well, like I said, I want to know how it all began. I mean I got interested in this and started reading, and I want to know about how the earth originated and I want to know what were the beginnings of Man. All I had to go by was Adam and Eve, and I don't buy that. I thought the logical way to attack it was to go through religion; then I find out that religion only goes back to 3000 b.c. Darwin goes back a couple million b.c., and I wonder what's going on all this time. Surely Neanderthal man must have some thoughts about what's going on, sitting out there in the cave looking at the stars at night; something must be going through his mind, definitely. And when the thunder comes, he knows he didn't do it."

"That's a religious question," I said. "'Who am I under these stars?'" But she went on, unhearing.

"-And the most difficult problem is, we have no concrete evidence. I mean nobody walks up to us and tells us point-blank, 'Well, I can tell you. I was there.' It's kind of difficult."

"Why do you want to know all that, Emerald? What difference does it make?"

"It probably doesn't make any difference. It's a good way to keep me busy." Then, as if dissatisfied with her own diffidence, she frowned and added, "It helps my understanding of the world around me, and I think that's pretty important." She went on to muse about how simple it would be to be an animal.

"How come," she asked, "the animals are so successful and we're so unsuccessful? We're the ones with brains." Emerald looked across at me, her face a question. Yet something told me she didn't want an answer—at least not from me. I nodded, holding her eye. She looked down again, shook her head softly. "It seems everything is in chaos."

I waited a moment for us both. "What's to be done about it? Is your quest somehow a way out of it?"

She was silent for a long time, studying her own fingers on the empty coffee cup. "To find out," she said finally, passion sheathed in velvet, "or even touch on what the differences, what the hinge is, what the chaos hinges on."

I think we must have looked like lovers at that moment, leaning toward each other, eyes on something invisible between us, oblivious. But just then there was a loud bump and a screech as the door swung open and a huge checkered man burst through the steam and greeted the other two inhabitants of our world. "Goddamn, ain't it some cold out there?"

We both leaned back; the clock caught my eye, and I signaled the waitress. I had several more people to see before dark. As we awaited our change, I spoke of my own journey toward a way of being that I didn't understand. I did so, not sure what my words would mean to her but wanting her to know that I too needed and valued the part of me that wouldn't come out even. Then we arranged for another meeting, put on our parkas, and plunged into the dazzling cold. She gave me a quick wave, slipped into her car, and purred off to the south. Turning out of the parking lot, I noticed a bank of clouds to the west. "At least it should warm up," I thought, and headed north.

As I drove, my mind kept returning to the conversation with Emerald. I was intrigued with how she used language—that extraordinary concreteness: a course in the Old Testament would "give religion," archeology would "give a kind of scientific answer," "Religion only goes back to 3000 b.c. Darwin goes back a couple million...." There was a coarseness about how she packaged the ideas in their words, yet a marvelous poetry in her vision: "And when the thunder comes, he knows he didn't do it." Did that tangibility have something to do with her intellectual growth, or was it simply her personality? Would education blunt her intrinsic sensibility? How could I honor her curiosity without harming her innocence?

And what did "growth" mean for her anyway? "Not getting jerked around so much by other people, not always worrying about what they think of me," she said. Was that just selfishness, or was this thrust toward independence part of a larger pattern in her life? Did her returning to school cause this new concern, or was it the result? Clearly it was placing a strain on her relationship with her brother. How was it affecting her two children, her friends? What was cause and what effect in the game of hide-and-seek between Emerald and her world?

Then there was that astonishing drive for some sort of deeper meaning to her life. Was this a question she had always harbored and only now allowed to surface? Or did school have something to do with stirring it up? I wasn't sure how I felt about that. On the one hand, it seemed a positive thing for people to ask serious questions of their lives; on the other, it could be deeply disturbing for some to lose the sources of meaning that had sustained them for so long. Friends may be lost, and marriages suffer. Who was I to tamper with their inner lives? I was no psychiatrist; I wasn't trained in these things. Yet all I had done was to ask her about what she was learning and offer her my best version of an honest response. Was Emerald simply going through the kind of crisis of certainty

that most of us have gone through as we continue our education, or was it something more?

Running Low

The clouds had already slipped beneath the sun as I pulled into Ed's place, a ragged farmhouse connected to the barn by a ramshackle chain of sheds. Ed still owned the land the house was on but had auctioned off the rest two years ago when his farm went under, a victim of economic forces he refused to understand.

I was appropriately sympathetic when he first told me the story, but it brought me up short when he added that in a way he was glad it had happened. He had long since grown tired of farming.

"I needed the change," he said. "Farming hasn't much to do, you know, with growing things any more. Mostly it's fixing goddamn busted machinery. If I'da wanted to be a mechanic I'da been one."

Besides, he had begun drinking and only recently dried out with the help of the local AA chapter. Now his wife was supporting the family, and he did odd jobs while he studied psychology. "I really want to work with people," he told me, "in the time I got left." Where he'd find that work was anybody's guess. But there was an urgency behind his words that hinted of more than a desire for vocational training. In his early fifties, he felt time was running out. Where was he headed? Would his educational voyage take him where he wanted to go? Did he know what a terrible chance he was taking? And what was my part in that journey?

I parked beside his old Ford tractor, hauled my briefcase out of the back seat, and headed for the shed where the kitchen would be. As I saw Ed's shadowy form through the frost on the storm door and reached for the frozen latch, the questions still burned.

Ed, Emerald, and thousands like them are part of a major revolution in higher education, one that has seen the proportion of older students in classrooms double within a single generation. Spurred by declining enrollments among traditional-age students and by a growing recognition that many adults want to continue their education but lack the means, a number of colleges began to design special programs during the 1970s to accommodate the new student. Because most adults had jobs, courses were offered at night or on weekends, and degree requirements became more flexible; classes were longer and less frequent. Because the majority were parents, part-time study became more available and financing more appropriate. And because the age range of this new group was considerably greater than that of traditional students, new assumptions were made about how best to teach and support them. After all, the conventional curriculum had evolved in response to the relatively innocent and distinctly different needs of late adolescents. People like Emerald bore a breadth of experience and depth of emotional capacity largely unavailable to traditional college-age students. To attempt to teach a thirty-five-year-old widow in the same way one would an eighteen-year-old halfback did not make good sense.

It is this last matter that has most intrigued me over the years. First as teacher and administrator in a community college, later as external degree program mentor and researcher, I was struck again and again with the awesome differences among adult learners and have long sought a better way of understanding them. Why is it that at only twenty-eight Susan seems so much more able to handle complex ideas than Arthur, a retired businessman, even though her knowledge and experience are so much less? Is it background, gender, friends, intelligence (whatever that means)? Or could it be age? Is Arthur simply over the hill? Do our minds, like our bodies, just deteriorate over time? Why do so many women return to school in their mid-thirties, so many men in their

forties? What is happening in their lives or in our society that creates such a pattern? What are the special concerns of these groups that might give us a better basis for designing curricula? Is there any way to reconcile these students' pragmatic needs for specific, job-related knowledge with their deeper needs for more comprehensive understanding of their worlds?

I think I first began to entertain the notion that the metaphor of a journey might offer a useful framework during a conversation with Ellen, one of my first students. She was telling me about her experience of returning to school after a thirty-year absence.

"It's like a river," she said, drawing a line across the table between us. "It's like I'm back there and want to get over here, and the only way I can do it is to cross the river. So I say, 'OK,' take a deep breath, and go. And I make it over here. And that's where you are; you are alive. Sometimes I get mixed up about the journey across the river; sometimes I think it's the worst experience of my life; other times I think it's the most fantastic experience ... but you know, when you get over here, you leave something-you have to-and sometimes I wish I was that person back there, but I can't be and I don't want to be. I mean I can't ever be that person again. Once you cross that river, the innocence is gone."

I was to hear the journey metaphor often after that, as I began asking people what it was like for them to re-turn to school. It was an extraordinarily useful way for people to get a handle on their experience, to name the feelings that too frequently kept them awake nights. Because journeys have destinations, it gave a sense of movement and purpose to what often seemed without meaning, helped them understand that confusion, uncertainty, and fear may be a necessary-even valuable-part of educational growth. And it helped me grasp the differences among them more readily. In a way, some had simply traveled more than others; some seemed never to have left home, while others had gone centuries away. But if my students were travelers, then who was I as teacher? If education was most about the growth of the learner, what was my part?

I was beginning to realize that teaching is, finally, a special kind of relationship, a caring stance in the moving context of our students' lives. Of course it involves knowledge; of course the teacher has to know something, but what we know is of value only as we are able to form it such that our students can make use of it for their own evolving ways of knowing. I was keenly aware that for every student I was a unique person. Each saw me differently, and I needed to be different for each. Our students are always in motion, I was coming to realize, and our task is to honor that motion, to understand how each student sees education and teachers differently at different times. The job, it seemed, was not so much to individualize instruction as to enrich education so each student could take from it what he or she most needed at the time.

But occasionally the questions seemed overwhelming. What was that loss of innocence that Ellen described so eloquently? How did my own journey mesh with hers? If we were all in motion, what did timing have to do with the art of teaching? Is there some way of understanding this more clearly, so we can ask sharper questions, offer better suggestions, provide richer support?

This book is at best an interim report, an attempt to sketch some beginning answers to the questions lurking behind the storm door at Ed's house. As they burned their way into my awareness, I found the outlines dimly swimming somewhere in the space between me and nearly every film or novel I encountered, every story I read to my children, every conversation with my students. They began to fuse into a single, deeper question: What is my place in the growth of those I care for? As I held the question, not surprisingly I began to discover shards all about me-answers that have been with us since the beginning

of time.

In the next chapter, we look more closely at the metaphor of adult learning as a transformational journey, and especially at how Mentor serves as a guide for the journey.