

Confessions of a Tenured Professor

Relax, Don't Be So Banal*

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At the outset of Hemingway's "Banal Story," we meet the protagonist—H's double, no doubt—sitting alone in some remote cabin somewhere in Michigan dividing his time between thinking about writing and wondering about the wondrous adventures—the equivalent of today's X-Games—others elsewhere in the world are enjoying. This situation involving the passive, pensive man and the unnamed adventure-seekers suggests on the surface a contrast of sorts, one that juxtaposes living life in the moment with merely writing about doing so.

But, of course, when entering into one of Hemingway's stories—regardless of the premise—one cannot help but suspect that the writer (as opposed to his purportedly lackluster hero) is up to something edgy and adventurous—after all, he is Hemingway. And, as it turns out, this is the case: Ernest, true to form for this larger-than-life thrill-seeker/Modern(ist) Bear Grylls who could have starred in a 1970s aftershave commercial and who continues to make all those literature professors who attempt to teach his works look in comparison a little like Francis Macomber, was exploring in this story the relationship between having adventures and creating texts that, when read, resemble them. Accordingly, careful yet daring readers of "Banal Story"

soon realize that the title to this ostensibly simple story is ironic, misleading even. What on the surface seems prosaic—spending time in isolation thinking and writing about other places and other more outwardly exciting exploits—proves when one goes spelunking into the recesses of the narrative to be extraordinarily challenging, even more than running with the bulls or staring down the gun barrel at a charging rhino.

At least this is the interpretation that I apply like salve to my addled brain when I am in interesting places doing less-than-exotic work, like grading papers, prepping for class, or writing rough drafts of essays I will likely never have the courage to submit for publication (quick confession: coming originally from Boise, Idaho, and now residing in Northfield, Minnesota, I have a low threshold for what constitutes “exotic”—Chunky Monkey ice cream, Canada, seafood with the shell still on, The Travel Channel, drinks on fire, money with holes in it, and children speaking foreign languages—are examples of things, people, and places that strike me as out of the ordinary).

And speaking of exotic places, I have in the last couple of years developed the habit of watching calls for papers for conferences in out-of-the-ordinary locales such as Tallahassee or Denver or Iowa City and thinking rashly when I see one that looks intriguing, *That's it! I am doing it; I'm sending in an abstract, writing that paper, and living large for a long weekend right during the middle of the semester. Heck* (yes, I actually think “heck”—see above about where I am from), *I might even cancel classes for a day and go to the entire conference* (of course canceling classes means convincing the students to meet one-on-one with me in conferences, so

as to assuage my guilt). Then, six or seven months later, when I get to the conference, I spend all of my spare time right up to the minute my panel presents revising my paper (and when I am not checking for punctuation problems in a paper that only my eyes will ever see, I labor over the conference schedule, mapping out the two or three-day “get-away” while struggling with the thought of maybe, possibly skipping a session or part of one and going for a jog or possibly visiting a museum or a beach—or, in Iowa City, a book store).

But then, after I’ve presented and attended the requisite number of sessions to justify the college’s investment, I go crazy. I party like an undergrad on the last day of finals. Or, actually, honestly, I don’t. I mean to. But then I get derailed by old habits. So, instead of raging on a Saturday night a thousand miles from obligations, I make the most of that free time by getting a pile of papers graded before returning home the next morning. And maybe after finishing those papers I buy one beer from the bar, respond to the emails that have piled up in the previous couple of hours and then, after that, begin writing or revising a paper.

I tell myself on those occasions when I resist the urge to turn the conference into something close to a vacation and instead turn my attention to writing something I have been threatening to put down into words for months and maybe years, that I’ve actually made the hard choice; I’ve been Hemingway’s character holed up in the cabin contemplating his next turn of phrase, which—if one runs the blend correctly, to borrow from Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities*—means I’ve done something even more exciting than those colleagues tipping back beers in the hotel bar

or taking in whatever the host city has to offer academics eager to act like something other than academics for a few hours. To quote my siblings, “What a nerd.” Honestly.

My point is, I cannot seem to stop working, ever, even after earning tenure. As a writer-wanna-be, I collect anecdotes and examples for possible essays and papers in the same cheap way that when traveling I collect soaps and all-over-body shampoo/lotion at the hotel (along with shower caps—who uses these things, anyway?). I spend time with my kids as if I’m a graduate student in sociology hoping to gather up some juicy research tidbits I can feed to my ravenous dissertation. I am getting to the point where I can hardly leave our apartment without a camera and notebook (I am channeling Adrienne Rich as I dive into the day).

Do other professors experience this kind of obsessive thinking about their work? Are biology instructors stopping themselves midsentence while spending time with family and friends to pick up bugs or catalogue flowers? Do mathematicians stand over spilled jars of peas or toothpicks or sugar cubes and start counting? Are the archeologists hanging out in cemeteries on the weekends? Are child psychologists crashing parties at Chuckee Cheese? Please tell me that as an English prof and aspiring writer that I’m not alone. Tell me I’m not the only insecure one always overanalyzing everything. And how’s this for a confession? I have actually Googled my own name in order to see how I am doing these days in the way of publications. I have. (Isn’t that awful? What kind of drip does this stuff?)

And during this year, one I am spending in Norway on what is undoubtedly the most adventure-laden Fulbright—one that entails traveling to the remote corners of the country each

week by plane, train, auto, ferry, and cab—I have, predictably I suppose, struggled with conflicting desires. On the one hand, I feel obligated to engage the country and culture, to say “yes” to all opportunities that come my way and to throw myself into every challenge and temptation that beckons. On the other hand, liberated from committee work, departmental obligations and, most gloriously, ungraded student papers, I have felt inclined to get more in the way of writing and research done. *Imagine all that I could publish this year if I just focus*, I tell myself, often in the middle of the night when I find it hard to sleep, moved by this blank canvas of spare time stretching out in front of me. But then this thought is often followed by an undercurrent pulling me out to where I am living and all the things I could and probably should be doing, such as ice climbing, cross-country skiing in the nearby Nordmarka, learning Norwegian, spending some quiet time with the quiet neighbors, sneaking in trips here and there to places not on my work docket, etc.

This dilemma has lead me to where I am now, which is to say sitting here in my swimming suit on a long, orange and white lounge chair under a blue sky next to a kidney-shaped pool at an all-inclusive resort in the Canary Islands. They have a Norwegian school here in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, and—in keeping with my work as a “Fulbright Roving Scholar” who visits Norwegian high schools and colleges far and near—I have made the trip all the way from Oslo to share my wisdom with, and offer my support to, these Norske students and teachers banished to this desolate paradise.

Anyway, my work ethic—the thing that is leading to this laptop-shaped white spot on my otherwise red body—is making it nearly impossible to relax, even while on this all-expenses-paid junket to Las Palmas. While I am here, I am required to teach two classes a day; after that—after noon each day—the time is mine. It is spare time. (No office hours, no email obligations, nothing.) I could use it for swimming, napping, reading, not reading, eating, drinking, whatever. I could pal around with Sigrid and Olav, two retirees who spend a month or two here each winter; and we could ignore the effects of gravity and age and talk or not about whatever comes to mind while sipping complimentary drinks and waiting for lunch/dinner/cocktail hour. I could comb the beach in search of neat, white shells I would mean to bring back to my barna but would forget on the bathroom counter after cleaning them. I could hole up in my room and pass the time standing on the patio eleven stories up above the Atlantic Ocean—thousands and thousands of miles from snowed-under Minneapolis and Augsburg College—looking out dumbly at the ocean. But, predictably once again, I won't. Instead, I will sit here writing this column in hopes of getting a draft done soon so that I can turn my attention to an article about the relationships between and among media, climate change, narrative theory, and apathy (to be sure, any other normal person would simply enjoy this sliver of climate change here near the equator in late January).

Still, there is hope.

There is always the possibility that I can in the next six months learn from the Norwegian approach to education and, more generally, life. Here, they have work/life balance; and if there

is ever a lack of balance, life wins the battle every time. On Fridays, for example, my son Cal—who's nine and in fourth grade—finishes classes at one o'clock, at the latest. More often than not, however, he will call us at 12:00 or 11:30 or even 11:00 and ask, exasperated, "Where are you guys? School's out and I'm just waiting here by myself." In our recent parent-teacher conference Cal's teacher explained, "Friday's early release time was my idea. Parents were always taking their kids out early to leave for the cabin or a holiday in Spain or Greece or somewhere; so I proposed at our faculty meeting that we just get out early on Friday from now on. And you know what? We didn't even vote on it. Everybody just agreed it was a good idea, and that was that." In the States, and especially at my college, we would have so many meetings and do so many studies to decide 1) whether we should meet, 2) when we should meet, 3) for how long, and, 4) in what room, that we'd forget that we were meeting talk about the idea of working (and meeting!) less on Fridays. Soon, we would all give up on the proposed proposal and go back to work, which would involve staying until 5:00 or 6:00 on Fridays.

At 3:00 (and in some schools 2:00), when the final bell rings (or doesn't, depending), school is out and so are the lights. There are no after-school activities: no sports, clubs, or extracurricular activities of any kind, and—from what I can tell—few after-hours meetings among teachers or between teachers and students. And forget email. I've emailed the secretaries, teachers, and rectors of dozens upon dozens of schools trying to establish contacts and set up visits and never received even one of those dishonest responses along the lines of, "Sorry I didn't get back to you in the last month...we have been having problems with our

server...” or, “I lost track of my emails...” or, simply, “I’m sorry.” Nope. Nothing. When you say to a teacher—having sent him or her email the day before—“Did you get the message I sent requesting the school’s address and the time you wanted me to show up?” you are often met with a look that says, “I have email? Huh, well I’ll be.” At first this laid-back attitude toward class time and after-hours email bothered me. But now I admire it tremendously. I can’t get there, to that place of acceptance and relaxation, but I admire and envy those who have.

Another helpful habit I hope to adopt has to do with drinking coffee and spending time with/near other teachers. No matter what is going on in your life and with your work, you have to have a cup of coffee in Norwegian schools before class *and* during the break. (Due to weather-related travel problems, I have arrived on numerous occasions to a school minutes before I am slated to begin teaching to an auditorium full of 100 or so students; harried and worried about not being prepared when the first bell rings, I have been ushered upon my arrival not to the classroom but instead to the faculty lounge, where I join a couple of other teachers for a cup of coffee and some painful small talk). Then, after you teach your morning classes, you have to go to the cafeteria with the other teachers and eat lunch. There’s no getting out of it, even if you have more prepping to do or emails to write or read. The high school teachers here don’t have their own classrooms—they’re like college professors in that way—but they do value their time with each other during lunch (they’re unlike most college professors in that way). They pull out their *mat pakker* (lunch boxes), sit down on nice chairs and sofas in what more often than not looks and feels a little like an IKEA (pronounced ick-kay-uh) and talk and listen

and listen and talk. Unhurried, healthy, calm. Nobody's checking their email. Nobody's on the phone. It's brilliant.

So, fortunately for this workaholic, I ended up here in this oil-rich welfare state working alongside reasonable, productive teachers, people who manage to get a great deal of work done by three o'clock, before turning their attention to more important things, like skating (*skøyter*), hiking (*vandring*), and reading (*lesing*) something other than student papers (*livet-drenering onde*).

That said, there remains in me some stubborn belief that Hemingway was right, that the real adventures are in the mind, that finding just the right word or angle or insight is as good and exciting and worthwhile as is ice-climbing (*isklatring*) or kayaking with the whales (*kajakk med hvalene*) or anything else a person could do anywhere else in the world. The truth is, I am never more alive and present than when I am nearing the end of an essay or story that I am writing: I crawl up to its conclusion in much the same manner I recently inched my way out to the sharp edge on Pulpit Rock near Stavanger, my heart pounding and my palms sweaty. With the firm feel of what I've written beneath me and all that hasn't been said out there beyond the last line of the ending not yet written, I feel the wind rushing up the face of the cliff from the Lysefjord waters nearly 2,000 feet below, and I think to myself, *This is where I want to be*. And *this* is where I want to be, right here at the earth's midsection, beneath what feels like a summer sun and a familiar, lovely laptop.

*I am assuming it rhymes with it; but you know what they say about what happens when you assume (and in this case the irony is almost palpable).