

Literary Odyssey - Richard Arlin Stull

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(approximately 1373 words)

December 3, 2003

"Philosophy have I digested, the whole of law and medicine. From each its secrets I have wrested, alas theology thrown in. Poor fool, with all this sweated lore, I sit no wiser than I was before."

- Goethe's Faust

While my own educational experience and academic trajectory intersects with some of what I do professionally, particularly in the teaching of general education classes, it has been more of a personal literary Odyssey – one that has given me great pleasure simply for its own sake.

My first great intellectual influences were my parents. My father was a former minister, turned social worker/probation officer in Watts eventually to become a vice-president of a small international consulting company. He was one of the first corporate consultants to take incorporate the philosophers of “human potential movement” (Maslow, Murphy, Maltz, Keen, Brown, etc.) into corporate boardrooms during the Sixties. He also read everything Plato and Aristotle ever wrote, loved the romantic poets, Shakespeare, the Old and New Testament and, particularly, Goethe and Schiller.

My grandmother was an orphan who eventually earned a Bachelors and advanced teaching degree, taught elocution and rhetoric, knew the Bible by heart, raised two mentally handicapped sons in her home along with my father and his sister, and was elected Woman of the Year in Seattle, Washington for her outstanding political, community, and religious service.

My mother was a professional classical singer and later in charge of film programming at KGO television in San Francisco in the late 50's. Previous to that she worked for Mortimer Adler and John Maynard Hutchins at the University of Chicago, speaking to educational groups and high schools all over the Midwest about high school liberal arts curricula.

My wife of twenty years studied evolutionary biology at the University of Michigan and later wildlife management at Humboldt State University. Her grandparents were Lebanese immigrants, one of whom belonged to the Druze sect, a 12th century offshoot of Islam which began in the hilltop regions of Syria and Lebanon.

I grew up in Berkeley, and then moved to the South Bay, where I attended an upscale liberal high school that had just been integrated with a community that had a crime and murder rate comparable to the inner cities of Newark and Detroit. This experience provided a first-hand opportunity to see the culture clashes of race and socioeconomic status. Joan Baez came to Stanford University and our high school every year to give us a concert. As a junior, I took a year of African-American literature taught by an enigmatic English teacher from inner city Detroit and read Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Leroi Jones, Claude Brown and James Baldwin. We had guest presentations in our English classes from the Black Muslims, street poets, the Venceremos, the Weather Underground and a former all-pro NFL middle linebacker who looked like Cat Stevens on steroids and who denounced football as a violent, capitalist, exploitative and racist activity. As a senior, I tutored math and reading at an elementary school across the highway two days a week as part of a service-learning program in my

high school sociology class. My tutoring cohort was a roly-poly, mop-haired, twentieth century Tom Sawyer who kept snakes and iguanas in his bedroom and had a pet alligator that slept at the foot of his bed at night and hissed at his mother and his friends. The kids at the elementary school called us “Laurel and Hardy” and treated us like celebrities. We really enjoyed the kids, and the experience of teaching them was very humbling and rewarding.

At the University of California, San Diego, some of my favorite classes were in literature, ranging from the magical realism of Latin and Central America to African writers from Senegal and Algeria, to Chinese poetry. I later became interested in political philosophy and studied Marx and Lenin, Franz Fanon, and the Algerian, Cuban, Chinese and Russian revolutions. I also became interested in the Appropriate Technology movement, whose bibles were "Diet for a Small Planet," the “Sand County Almanac” and E.F. Schumacher's "Small is Beautiful." Additionally, I read many of the groundbreaking feminist writers, including Mary Wollstonecraft, Betty Friedan, Simon DeBeauvoir, Kate Millet and Germaine Greer.

After studying in West Berlin, Heidelberg and Strasbourg, France and traveling to the Soviet Union and the Middle East my junior year, I graduated and went to work in sales and marketing for an international freight forwarding company. Two years later, I went to Washington DC for a year to join my best friend, who was Al Gore's environmental Legislative Aide.

Due to a personal tragedy, however, I re-evaluated everything I believed in. I decided to return to California to “disappear” and recreate myself. I worked in a lumber mill full-time for three years in Humboldt County, having known no one when I first arrived here. I read extensively in Eastern Philosophy and had a spiritual experience reading the Indian mystic, Krishnamurti. I continued my study of the martial arts, which had always been an interest of mine. Fueled by the desire to explain the mind over matter question with reference to my emerging interest in meditation, mind control and the

martial arts, I decided to get a Master's Degree in Physical Education. While teaching martial arts, I became interested in physics and decided to look into Newtonian mechanics as the mathematical analog to the metaphors I read about in Eastern classics. I got my doctorate writing about the physics of karate. I was prepared to go on to another adventure, perhaps another degree in literature. By now, however, I was married and desired a family, so I began my teaching career.

The short of it is that my education was very rich, very diverse, very stimulating and enlightening. But there was something missing. I still didn't have a real understanding of Western traditions. I had read many critiques of them; indeed most of my study in high school and college focused on critiques of the Western canon and traditions. In 1994 I decided that I wouldn't wait until I was retired to read the Western classics, so I and two other community members co-founded the Northcoast Book Discussion Group. Since then I have read over one hundred titles and have been rewarded in ways that could never be measured quantitatively. I realized that I was less of an educator and a person for not having known Dostoevsky's notion of mystery, magic and authority in his "Grand Inquisitor" chapter in the *Brothers Karamazov*, or Machiavelli's rationale of "virtu and fortuna," or Goethe's retelling of one more person's "deal with the devil."

I came to realize that whether one agrees with the premises of these authors is not the important issue. What is important, I've come to believe, is that their teachings are examined and discussed as part of a long social dialogue, and not simply dismissed as the ideas of a misinformed and corrupt past. It is folly to talk about current notions as somehow more "relevant" or "correct" without having the context of the past.

In a very real sense, my education was the reverse of that of many. Before I was introduced to the "classical texts," I had many diverse experiences in living, travel, and formal and informal intellectual study. I wouldn't have traded it for anything. I learned a lot about "following the money" as a way of interpreting history and about power

relationships as a mechanism for understanding class, society and gender. I also learned an invaluable lesson in reading the original texts – as opposed to simply learning about them through contemporary critiques or interpretations. I learned that contemporary surface tides are in constant flux, and that deeper currents will always be there affecting the seen in unseen way unless we choose to try to understand the powerful forces beneath the surface. It has been a continuing Odyssey – and I haven't come home yet.

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