

Leaving Home - Finding Place

(for Bob Fox)

By Larry Smith (BGSU Firelands College)

I remember those long drives from home to college like a repeated wounding I could not understand. It lasted for decades, till I began letting it go.

I was class valedictorian of Central High School in the industrial Ohio Valley town of Mingo Junction, winner of a partial scholarship to Muskingum College, a Presbyterian liberal arts college along the edge of Ohio's Appalachia. "A small Christian college for small Christians," one upperclassman later joked, while I was still impressed with my just being there. I was to follow my brother David as the second Smith to enter college. "Go to college," that was my goal during high school, but without any real sense of why or what that would mean. My father was a railroad brakeman at Weirton Steel; my mother married him while in high school, and gave birth to David, ending my father's own dream of going to college. Though my family drove with me on that first trip to college, my longer journey would be without them and that was part of the confusion and the pain.

I remember loading the new family car—a rust-gold 1960 Pontiac with cool looking tail fins. A lot of people were buying cars during those heyday years for the steel mills. Our working-class family had always 'inherited' our cars for a reasonable price from Uncle Harry, bachelor uncle hand-me-downs, but this time we traded in our Desoto for the dream of something more. I remember Dad's broad smile as he drove us to college that day.

I had packed most of the items from the list of "Things to bring with you to college," including the trench coat and umbrella. I loved the sly style of that coat, but never carried an umbrella, nor needed the "rubbers" (snicker) for the rainy weather. I had lived in Ohio all my life without "rubbers" or a need for the "optional tuxedo." And so Dad and I closed the trunk on my bulging suitcase, my portable typewriter, lamp, clock radio, and dictionary, and with Mom and my girlfriend Barbara we headed down river to Bridgeport, then west on Rte. 40, the National Road, over those Appalachian hills toward "college." Barb and I talked and cuddled while Mom fussed with Dad and warned us: "Okay now, no lollygagging, back there."

The population of New Concord, Ohio, was equal to that of its college students, at 1,200 each, too small for any outward signs of town-and-gown struggle, so isolated, students had to stay close and behave. The town had two small café's off of Rte. 40, a barbershop, a beauty shop, gas station, ice cream stand, bookstore with housekeeping necessities, several churches, and of course—the college. Green rolling hills spread everywhere including the college where the girls' and boys' dorms were kept a hill and valley apart. The 10:00 curfew for girls was to keep us all in line, and married students were forbidden to live in the dorms. A half a mile walk from

the dorms, around the football field or the college pond, brought you to the classrooms on the "Quad": seven old buildings for natural and social science, business, education, humanities, music, the gymnasium, the seventh being the revered Brown Chapel which we attended twice a week for required talks and services.

Back then, being a "Church School" meant something big to the college (administration and faculty and trustees), and over time less to the students. During the 1960's though upperclassmen kept our attendance at Chapel, where we heard sermons, choirs, and professorial and protestant talks. I asked my Catholic roommate, "Man, how can you survive all of this indoctrination?" He shrugged, "I sleep through most of it," as he did with his classes. The two new buildings on campus included the compact Student Union and what seemed to me then a large library where I came to spend many hours researching and watching pretty co-eds enter and leave again.

Though I most feared the disgrace and waste of "failing out" that first year, I found myself succeeding in my studies, yet adrift in social affairs. I had a serious girlfriend back home whom I wrote to almost daily and a family who loved and supported me, and now a new culture beckoned to me-I had a foot in both worlds. Like most freshmen sheep, I did everything I was asked-including attending Sunday School and church service that first semester. Required faculty "Teas" were held where we all stood in a long line wearing our best suits and dresses yet jittered with ineptitude and feigned politeness. This was carried out to a lesser extent in the dining halls where each evening half the freshmen girls and half the guys would trade hills to dine together for shared meals with all the social graces. My mother had taught me politeness and my studies had given me proper grammar, but there were edges in my working-class talk and dress that had to be curbed, and so I watched how I talked, and what I said and did. I found that my roommate and most of my classmates were from the suburbs and from middle to upper class wealth. On weekends, I had to practice 'getting by' on \$2 until I started washing dishes in the college cafeteria.

Did I fit in? Well, I didn't stand out, except as a quiet boy. I think it was more a matter of blending into my environment, making adaptations that cost me later. You see, I loved the world of learning and ideas, gathering in dorm rooms to play Hearts or euchre and actually talking about more than sports and women, going to the homes of faculty for cozy "coffee Klatches," picking up my grades from an 'advisor' who actually knew more than my name. I loved reading literature and discussing it as though it mattered. I had been trained in math and sciences to keep up with the Russians in the Space Race. Yet during one early morning Calculus class, I stared out the window into the trees wondering what these number abstractions had to do with life, mine or anyone's. That afternoon I switched my major from math to English and literature.

During the week at Muskingum, I would attend all arts performances (opera, theatre, mime, readings), every author lecture and campus film. I saw my first foreign film sitting in Spanish class there and blessed the subtitles. Sitting in those audiences absorbing all, I felt myself growing into a world that sadly had nothing to do with my past.

This would come clear to me when I traveled home to the Valley to be with my girlfriend and family. If I couldn't get a lift off of the "ride board," I would risk hitchhiking to get there. And on that ride, I would feel my own uneasy mix of anticipation and dread...longing to feel home again, and fearing they would sense my cultural betrayal. Back home I would change my dress and speech to fit in. Glibly I would answer, "Yes, Mom, college is fine. I'm doing well. Don't worry." And we would talk of Grandma, or my sister Janis would crack a joke. They couldn't understand a world so distant from their own that I couldn't manage to bridge. I remember sending home my first "A" paper on "Shakespeare's Theme of Love" and Mom later saying, "Oh, it was fine, Honey. But I couldn't understand a word of it." Now, my mother was a reader and versed at verbal irony, but Shakespeare was not common ground for her. Pushed and pulled to connect these two worlds through myself, I usually ended feeling a fraud in both.

For decades I would blame myself for this internal conflict, then about ten years ago I found a book of personal essays, *This Fine Place So Far from Home: Voices of Academics from the Working Class*, edited by [C. L. Barney Dews](#) and [Carolyn Leste Law](#). I began sharing the experience of other working-class academics at a Working Class Studies conference at nearby Youngstown State University. My wife and I had sometimes talked of these inner conflicts, and my good friend and author Bob Fox had shared his moving from Brooklyn, New York, to rural southern Ohio and Ohio University (See his *Moving Out, Finding Home*, Wind Publications). I began to realize some things. The school itself had been classist and narrow in denying my working-class world. In fact the term 'working class' never appeared in my education till my junior year. Sitting in the middle of a class on Introduction to Sociology, I learned that I and my family were not "middle-middle," not "lower-middle," but in fact "lower class." Such cultural bias is built into the language of socio-economics (upper-middle-lower-even "under" classes now); it was like having someone step on your face while telling you to "Get up." And this socio-economic status is taught as though a fact of life without real empathy or understanding. Who was setting the standards? Who was holding the keys to culture standings?

When I think about it now, none of the cultural programs which I attended at Muskingum ever addressed my own working-class culture or my geographic identity. They all had the Protestant vision of examining one's deeds and conscience and finding them lacking with a harsh punishment and self-humiliation ready and near. Grace (or acceptance) had to be 'deigned' or earned; it wasn't a given. You see, the 'programs' and thinly disguised sermons had been chosen to develop or *lift us*. We were to escape our past and selves to come into the light. My brother-in-law once encountered this in a job program where the trainer boasted "I'm going to get

the Valley out of you." Yet the Valley was our home, our people, ourselves. On a level thought to be nice or kind, I'm sure, this indoctrination was being done at college 'to' and 'for' me. In a real way, I and others were being trained into a system of values equally parochial with my working class town. Point is, cloistered in those benign hills we were not given a choice and the vision simply wasn't broad enough, and this was symptomatic of most "liberal" arts colleges at that time. It wasn't so much what they taught, but what they did not. When decades later I watched the film *Dead Poet's Society* with its forced and narrow values this wounding came back to me with a shudder. Exclusive in character if not intent, our prescribed liberal arts education limited us. Their circle just wasn't wide enough and so choked the life of us all.

I certainly did not realize all of this back then, but I did endure it, and now see that what I did was develop a defense mechanism. I put a shell around that part of myself that was home and family (typically telling myself it was better and braver than it was); I separated it from those parts of myself that were becoming academic and middle class (believing they were inevitable and for my own good). It sounds so simple and cold, but it wasn't; it was complicated and only caused the to deep and grow the wounds I and so many others felt.

And on those drives back to college, my parents and girlfriend would leave Sunday dinner to drive the 4 hours with me. I would grow quiet, sitting in the back seat of our aging Pontiac with its big fins sticking out. My arm would be around my girlfriend, and we would talk softly while I felt the dread of these worlds coming together, and the shame of feeling that dread. Truth is my family never were welcomed on campus and never invited to belong there. In the midst of their sacrificing, I felt I was causing them pain yet denying them at the same time. We would drop off my things at the dorm and drive out to the roadside restaurant at the edge of town for a piece of pie and coffee. Worn out from my ambivalence for them, for college, and myself, I would beg them to drop me off at the campus gate where I would hug them all, kiss my girlfriend goodbye, and walk the long and lonely hills back to my dorm room.

* * *

The story doesn't end here. Though the cultural indoctrination continued and my quiet resentment festered in me, I discovered at college some good teachers and courses to engage my whole person-ones that embraced diversity without judgment. I trained in the skill of teaching and worked through the struggles of student teaching to some satisfactions and a career of service. In literature I found a study of the deeply human in William Faulkner's *Southerners*, Sherwood Anderson's *Midwest poor*, Philip Roth's *East Coast Jews*, Katherine Anne Porter's whole cultural *Ship of Fools*. In James Wright's poems I found my Ohio Valley people portrayed and revealed in art. I began writing those stories and poems myself. The college had given me the tools. But the course I found most relevant was "Human Growth and Development," a requirement for all teachers. Here the subject was life and the approach was to watch, listen, and understand without bias. I loved that

course and have spent much of my teaching life in a community college atmosphere where I could open doors, broaden the circle by welcoming others to a world where we all belong.

My girlfriend and I split up during our junior year as we lost the need to hold onto each other and learned to stand on our own. I eventually found another love in a hometown girl, Ann my wife. Together we drove out of the Ohio Valley pulling our little U-Haul of belongings over those hills heading for Northern Ohio. Here we broadened our education in state universities, and developed careers of nursing and teaching others. Our working-class life had taught us how to endure and survive, how to 'get by.' We visited our families 'back home' regularly and welcomed them into our place up north. We continue to share our children with them and with uncles, aunts, and cousins. Most importantly, we accepted and valued the Valley and took it with us into our lives.

[Appeared in *Heartlands: A Magazine of Midwest Life & Art* Vol. 5, Fall 2007, pgs. 84-86; The Firelands Writing Center]