



## Healing the Deconstructed Professor: The Power of Creative Avocations

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**Abstract**

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This work explores the idea that the works that we produce as scholars are, in most instances, the tip of an iceberg. The hidden portion of the iceberg is the individual whose whole life experience lies behind the scholarly work. A primary assertion of the work is that our creative work -- usually expressed in our avocations -- can reveal deeper levels of meaning in scholarly works. The work also addresses the notion that paying closer attention to our creative inclinations can result in both professional and personal growth and, collectively, a revitalization of the academy.

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Key words: creativity, scholarship, professional revitalization, logotherapy

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The irony of calling for a special issue of this groundbreaking journal to deal with creativity is no doubt unintentional. To be a contributor to this journal is to be creative. To exert the effort necessary to craft a work and then launch it in the still struggling arena of the electronic scholarly journal is to place creativity and daring above certainty and tradition. But I understand the impulse behind the call for this special edition. The academic world, for the most part, demands that we take our "work" and hammer it into the mandated form of the printed page. It often insists that the creative force that lies behind all good scholarship be shorn from the final project and find its expression in other venues. That is a shame. I doubt anyone ever felt the need to say, "Leonardo, these journals and diaries are all well and good. Do you think you could do a special one on creativity?" Curious isn't it, that we feel obligated to call for a *special* issue to explore creativity in scholarship.

Still it is a wonderful idea. Exploring the relationship between our artistic creativity and our role as scholars and professors of communication is a delightful task. For me it requires re-examining how I came to be a member of the academy, what expectations I brought to the academic life, and the extent to which those expectations have been, or can be, realized.

If I search back far enough I recall a series of Thanksgiving dinners in the late 1950s. It is impossible to say with any certainty that these dinners were what persuaded me to seek a career as a university professor, but I suspect that they lay heavy in the scales. It wasn't so much the dinners themselves that I recall with such clarity. It is the memories of the after-dinner conversations. As child full of the exhilaration that the first decade of life brings, I was usually the first to leave the table -- trailing the conversations of the adults in my impatient wake. But soon, spurned by my older siblings, I would return, seeking the company of my indulgent uncle for a game of whiffle ball in the basement.

"Sure, I'll play," he'd say. "Just let us finish our coffee." And then, as they plunged into their bottomless coffee cups, I was drawn into the magic of their conversation. My father, Jim, established sociologist and department chair, and his little brother Calvin, brilliant rising star in philosophy, would weave wonderful castles in the dining room air. I can still hear the musical cadence of their speech; strongly touched by both their rural roots in southeastern South Dakota, and their father's homiletic style, honed by decades in the pulpit of the old North Church. The lingering aroma of the feast would mingle with the stronger smells of the obligatory professorial pipes and the indulgent snifters of either their Jim or their Johnny -- Beam or Walker.

I understood little, if any, of their conversation -- but it was filled with the phrases of intellectual alchemy: folkways, mores, existential, phenomenological and epistemology. Mysterious words, powerful, and even a tad naughty to my ten-year-old ears. As their music droned on, and the wind moaned around the snug little house in Springfield, Ohio, I would drift off to sleep, still hoping for my ball game, but also thinking how wonderful it would be to shape the world with words like my father and my uncle.

It is now more than forty years later. Both my father and my uncle have retired. And although I have yet to attain either my father's administrative finesse or my uncle's profound insight; I have, to a certain extent, as a tenured full professor in an active and growing department, inherited their world. I doubt my father would be comfortable in this new version of the world he left behind almost 15 years ago. I also wonder how much my uncle misses of the academy he left just recently. I still talk with both of them: my father regularly, my uncle less than I should. Their conversations retain flashes of the old magic, but have less and less relevance to the world in which I live -- the university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

You see, woven through both sets of conversations -- the childhood dialogues to which I was merely audience, and those later discussions in which I was an active participant -- was something akin to a unified theory of human existence. There was an implied belief that human existence was both good and understandable. The debates always seemed to revolve around whether philosophy or sociology would reveal the path to that understanding. I, naturally, assert that they are both really communication scholars. But that's another story. The point is that since before I knew I had a "philosophy of education," a major tenant of my "philosophy of education" was that universities exist to further human knowledge and understanding. However, in the contemporary academy, *knowing* and *understanding* have become strangely differentiated and disconnected.

*Knowing* is discipline specific; it defines all those things we come to learn as we pursue the craft of our particular training. Furthermore, knowing encompasses the practicality of the academy -- what our students have to know in order to move smoothly into the corporatized world that is America in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We do "knowing" amazingly well. The furtherance of knowledge is truly the crowning glory of the universities of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. We peer out beyond our world to glimpse objects that lie at the very edge of the universe, stars teetering tantalizingly on the beginning of time. We peer inward to our own genome, swiftly unraveling the puzzle of what tiny bit of chemical code manifests itself as appearance, tendency, advantage and liability in the marvelous human creature. We can now "access" the collected texts of humanity. I doubt a single poet, philosopher, artist or author can escape the prying eyes of Google, Amazon, AltaVista or Yahoo. The various "readings" of reality, and assertions of "knowing" now flit around the globe in a potential conversation about which Socrates and Plato could only dream.

Yet, in the face of all this knowledge I am haunted by the image of two undergraduates who have somehow become members of the first manned flight to Mars. One is an engineering major, the other a philosophy major. They step out onto the surface of the red planet and gaze across the alien landscape and up to the awesome heavens above. The philosopher looks around and asks in a hushed tone, "How did we get here?" The engineer responds, "Oh, I know how we got here, I just wonder why we came." They are the products of my world -- so full of knowledge, so utterly devoid of understanding.

*Understanding* is the synthesis, the gestalt, the awareness of *why* knowledge is important and meaningful. It cannot exist without knowing, but it moves far beyond it. It is a commodity of decreasing value in the university, in part because it generates no direct profit and precious few grants. It is in both the pursuit of, and the realization of understanding, that creativity comes into play -- and I choose the word play with great intention. It is through creatively playing with what we know that we come to understand it. Einstein would,

all his life, play games to push knowledge into understanding. He would ask us to pretend that we were on a trolley moving away from the clock tower in Bern. And now, he cajoles us, pretend that the streetcar is riding on the light wave that conducts the image of the clock to our eyes. And now, since we are on the light wave that carries the image of a certain second to our eyes, is it not true that the image of that time will never move? Does that mean that time is affected by space and movement? Given what we "know" he asks us, how does this creative bit of play increase our "understanding" of the universe?

The devaluation of understanding, and the corollary disdain for creative play, in the contemporary university springs from our insistence upon specialization and the competition for resources. Specialization is largely a product of the "publish or perish" mandate. If you do not turn your insights into words on a printed page, you will be thrown out of the kingdom. Each discipline has journals that have been blessed by the "guild." Each journal "owns" a portion of the discipline. Those portions of the discipline define the appropriate areas of thought, and the savvy apprentice to the guild plans his or her research program to fit into one or two of those appropriate areas.

I do not know if the mandate of specialization can be avoided. It is steeped in tradition and does provide the academy with vital benchmarks and areas of comparison. It does, however, also incline us -- the professorate -- to see ourselves in very fragmented ways. We are deconstructed. We move along a narrowing pathway from the broadly inquisitive child, to the young student with some inclinations and aptitudes, to the college student with a specific major, to the graduate student with a small group of specialized mentors, to the young faculty member designing a focused research program, to the tenured senior faculty member with an area of turf both defined and protected. In this process we somehow move from seeking understanding through the eyes of our discipline to simply increasing the number of specialized areas that support the knowledge base of the discipline.

Again, an image forces itself upon me -- professors as sailors in a nighttime regatta. As sailors we have the charts provided by our discipline, and sure enough, as we peer out toward the horizon we can see the flashing beacons atop the lighthouses, warning us away from the shoals. The stars of the discipline shine brightly in the firmament, guiding us to the finish lines of retention, promotion, tenure, and merit salary increases. But as we come close to the shoals we hear the sound of voices over the water, songs incredibly alluring and sweet. It occurs to us that perhaps those distant shores are not places of distraction and danger, but are worthy destinations in their own right. They may well be those gardens of creative play where Einstein's trolley zips along photon freeways towards the wondrous world of understanding. But then we glance up at the sails, which we realize are huge vita sheets -- our vita sheets. Reminded of our identity and mission, we once again bend our backs to the race, speeding toward the safe harbors of Promotion, Retention, which nestle next to the glorious town of Tenureville.

But I am more than a reductionistic, deconstructionistic reading of my resume implies. I am, certainly, a "mass communication specialist who is a narrative theorist with particular interests in the nature of knowledge and understanding, new technology, and children's use of the media." Yet I continue to maintain that I am a whole lot more than just that.

So how do we resist this fragmentation, how do we reconstruct the deconstructed professor? I have some real problems with the rules of the regatta -- I see my junior colleagues sailing well in the race, but like racehorses with blinders, their necessary intense focus on the finish line precludes the breadth of consideration that marks the work of a truly creative mind. But appeals to the rules committee would, most likely, fall on deaf ears. So it is doubtful that we will reconstruct the professorate by reconstructing the academy itself.

It might, nonetheless, be possible to heal a deconstructed professorate and revitalize the academy -- almost in spite of itself -- by establishing mechanisms that allow us to share the person beyond our vita with our colleagues, students and friends. One such mechanism for healing and revitalization is a personal web portal like the one we have linked to the end of this essay. I see these kinds of sites as places of asynchronous interaction that allow my students, colleagues and friends to understand my work and my interests in far-greater depth than is possible in the classroom, at yearly conferences, or over a chance cup of coffee across the street. They do not constitute the blending of personal and professional relationships that enrich and define the ideal academic life, but they can be wonderful tools for facilitating those relationships. And the creation of those relationships does, in my opinion, lie at the center of healing the deconstructed professor

and revitalizing the academy. But I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

The healing of the deconstructed professor and the revitalization of the academy are separate assertions, driven by separate sets of underlying assumptions drawn, at least in part, from a couple of old standards left over from the most recent winnowing of my bookcase. I am a great believer in this time-honored process, but some of you may be young enough not to have gone through it yet. Let me explain: every so often we change offices. Maybe we move across the country, maybe we move across the hall. But somehow or another we find ourselves poised between a stuffed bookcase and an open cardboard box. I believe we make some of the great intellectual decisions of our lives at those moments. Now, we can keep all the books, but that is no decision at all. Or we can winnow the bookcases, jettisoning those books that have lost meaning or importance. Over the years, this process yields a library that is sparse, eclectic, and precious. It usually lives on its own shelf or in its own bookcase -- depending upon just how sparse it is. My strategy for healing and revitalizing the professorate rests to a great extent on these two works from my winnowed bookcases: Man's Search for Meaning by Viktor Frankl (1963), and Second Foundation by Isaac Asimov (1953).

Frankl informs the healing. In his explication of logotherapy, Frankl asserts that we can tolerate almost any living conditions as long as there is a meaningful reason to exist. That which Frankl calls meaning, and I have defined as understanding, is what is vital in our lives. What we cannot tolerate is a situation in which our understanding of the world is in disagreement with, or disconnected from, how we live in the world. Frankl defines this as "the existential vacuum" which results in a state of listless boredom. What we do for a living must be in balance with, or agreement with, what we understand about the world. Profession and avocation should be mutual affirmations of a single worldview. Frankl is quick to point out that such a state does not guarantee "happiness." But he is equally swift to assert that happiness is not the only state of mental health. The challenges of an unaccomplished goal may be as irritating as an unreachable mosquito bite, but they are often what keep us getting out of bed in the morning with renewed determination.

The healing I envision entails the reconstruction of each individual professor by legitimizing the recombination of vocation and avocation. At first blush, such an undertaking might seem as absurd as the TV ad where the Dad takes his cell phone out on the boat so he can get that "important business call" while he is fishing with his kid. I always want to ask, "Why would you want to combine those worlds? One is escape from the other." Aren't our avocations, those activities behind our resumes, escapes from the work-a-day world reflected on our vitae? Only, I would argue, if we are flirting with the old existential vacuum; only if there is a significant disconnect between what we *do* for a living and what we *understand* about the world.

What might such a disconnected world look like? Well, let's say you drive one of those giant trucks that hauls the dirt away from a strip mine for a living, and your avocation is nature photography. My guess is Frankl would say that such a life defines the roar of the existential vacuum cleaner. No amount of weekend photography is going to atone for the plunder of the work week. However, that isn't the world I have glimpsed when my colleagues have allowed me access to the life behind their resumes. In most instances, the creative personal endeavors behind the academic identity are further manifestations of the worlds we seek to understand as scholars and teachers.

I have a friend who is a "social scientist's social scientist." He worships regularly at the alters of clarity of design and parsimonious explanations. He is also a consummate academic editor. It doesn't matter whether the manuscript beneath his pen is bound for a national journal or the side pocket of a student's backpack; with a surgeon's precision superfluous words and phrases are sliced away and the requisite clarifying text is deftly inserted into the offending sentences and paragraphs. His avocation? Running. Well past his frivolous youth, he remains as svelte as a greyhound -- albeit no longer as swift. He also does the ironing for the family, taking an unusual joy in the precision of the folds, the clarity of line. Photography, and its ability to reveal great insights in single images, also intrigues him. This is not the bifurcation of a life torn between vocation and avocation, it is the clear manifestation of a worldview in one's avocation. The love of sparse and fit prose is echoed in the runner's sparse and fit physique. The clarity and crispness of the daily ironing mimics the well-crafted article whose parts fold neatly into one another. The insight of photography is the parsimonious explication of multiple variables brought into succinct focus in a now clearer vision of the world. I would argue that for many of us in the academy, our avocations allow us to express our understanding of life in arenas that are more forgiving than the classroom and the professional journal. The track, the kitchen, the workshop, the darkroom, the studio and keyboard; here our understanding of the

world flows most easily, here we are healed.

OK, you allow, maybe personal healing, maybe even some manifestation of my intellectual life in an unexpected venue. But how do those activities revitalize the academy? It would seem that the only impact of these avocations upon the academy would be a more energized, less fragmented professor pursuing his or her traditional activities. What is to be gained by sharing avocations among colleagues? Well, as an administrator, I would have settled for the energized, less fragmented professor in a heartbeat; but there is even greater value in those avocations. The greater value is in individual professors who sense less of a dichotomy between their professional and personal lives, and in a faculty who are able to know one another - intellectually and personally -- more fully and hence become colleagues in a deeper, richer sense of the word. The mechanism I envision for the facilitation of the establishment is something I call Master Tracks. But, again as is my wont, I'm getting ahead of my self. The model for Master Tracks is found in Asimov's Second Foundation, we find it in the insight of Seldon's Plan, and in the structure of the Prime Radiant -- both closely guarded by the Second Foundation . . . .

For those of you who are not Isaac Asimov fans, let me simply tell you that Hari Seldon is one of the dominant characters in Asimov's Foundation novels, a series of works that explores humanity's spread across the galaxies. Seldon's Plan is a blueprint for human existence and behavior. Rooted in a discipline called psychohistory, the Plan is a mathematical set of predictions of such precision that it can be used to guide the future of billions and billions of human beings. To those of you who are Asimov fans, I apologize, I know that it is criminally brief -- but I'm not really writing about the Foundation here. What I do want to talk about is Asimov's idea of the Prime Radiant.

The Prime Radiant was a device that allowed Seldon's Plan to be projected in a visible form. This scene describes our first introduction to the Prime Radiant. The First Speaker -- the head of the Second Foundation -- is showing it to a younger colleague:

They stood together in the light. Each wall was thirty feet long, and ten high. The writing was small and covered every inch.

"This is not the whole Plan," said the First Speaker. "To get it all upon both walls, the individual equations would have to be reduced to microscopic size -- but that is not necessary. What you now see represents the main portions of the Plan till now." (Asimov, 1953, p. 97)

From there they proceed to walk around in the projection of the Plan as the First Speaker points out the bits and pieces of the equation that have been contributed by various Speakers over the centuries. Every time I read those passages I am amazed at the impact they have had upon me. Asimov wrote the book in the early fifties and I read it first in high school in the mid 60s. Yet, when I think about the ways in which I think about how we can use technology in the service of education, the notion of the Prime Radiant inevitably comes back to me.

I have always wanted to create something I call Master Tracks, a sort of individualized Prime Radiant. In Master Tracks one would plot the works of some Master -- you choose him or her. But the Master Tracks would be an environment in which one could walk around in the life and works of a great mind. The works, in whatever medium -- text, painting, sculpture, music, film -- would be available to you, but so would be the surrounding life. If a work was created in Paris in the 1880s, then one could "walk" out into Paris at that time, hear the music, experience the contemporary culture in which the work of the Master had been created. The idea, of course, is to understand not only the content of the work, but to gain insight to the whole context in which the work was created, to understand the process by which it was created, to put oneself in the way of the possible serendipity that influenced the creation of the work and shaped the worldview of the Master.

To walk backwards in an effort to create Master Tracks is a monumental undertaking. There is no Prime Radiant, and no one created artifacts designed to be included in such a thing. Digitizing the world and works of Michaelangelo or Emily Dickinson to create Master Tracks in today's digital environment would require a lifetime of research and untold resources. But looking forward is a very different thing. Technologically, the Prime Radiant seems no big deal. The digital environment exists. We have, for the first

time in human history, the tools to create and store the perceptions of a life, and we each have access to a life -- our own.

I do not know if any of my professors saw themselves as Masters. I do not know if my father and my uncle saw themselves as such. But I know that I would love to walk around in their tracks. I would love to explore the avocations that bolstered the vocations that led to the insights I have come to treasure. I cannot help but believe that access to my peers' experiences, to their avocational efforts and insights would profoundly enrich the intellectual life of the academy.

As communication scholars, despite the differences of interest and perspective dictated by our areas of specific interest, we realize that human beings are not segmented entities. The process of communication is inextricably tied to the totality of the individual. We may choose to foreground certain aspects of our identity in a particular set of interactions, but communication scholars realize that that is merely opening one window to a much larger room. Most often, when I demand that a particular communication interaction be restricted to a particular context, it is because things like time, energy, caution and professional expediency prevent me from allowing my partners in that interaction access to "the whole me" which would be the more legitimate framing of the encounter. A mechanism like Master Tracks allows us to share a much larger view of our personal/professional duality with our colleagues, hence greatly increasing the opportunities for discussion and collaboration that could revitalize the academy.

At my institution we, as a faculty, are spread across an incredibly broad spectrum of lifestyles: singles, couples in all stages of life -- double income no kids, single income kids in college, kids out of the house -- old white guys, people of color, widows and widowers, gays and lesbians. All these have been represented on our faculty at some time over the twenty-odd years I have been here. Those lives carry widely differing options, opportunities, issues and concerns. Hence, it has been primarily happenstance that has led to the discovery that she does wonderful watercolors, he sings, they build cabinets, he is a rock hound, she's a tri-athlete. But once the discovery has been made the eyes light up, and the words tumble out; and you discover the person behind the colleague, and greater insight into his or her understanding of the world and the discipline.

I choose to believe that everyone has his or her version of the Thanksgiving story that began this essay; that my peers share my desire to move beyond simple knowing to more profound understanding. I also choose to believe that my colleagues hold fascinations beyond the obvious attractions of their resumes; that the inquisitive mind mandated by our way of life bubbles out in ways not revealed in the office, classroom or laboratory. I choose to believe that we are all Masters in someone's eyes, and that our tracks are deserving of note. The potential worth of such tracks is intriguing. Frankl's model implies they may heal us. Asimov's gives us cause to hope they may benefit the academy a whole.

I have chosen the Internet as the medium in which to explore ways of recording my own tracks. I have created a web site that shamelessly co-mingles my vocation and my avocations. It is my own exploration of the possible interrelationships between the two. It is a work in progress to which you are all invited. I welcome your visits and your comments. Here is the URL:

<http://www2.ncsu.edu/ncsu/chass/communication/faculty/schrag/webpub/distribution.html>

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