Chapter 10. University Crises and the Search for Meaning: Where Do I Belong?

When institutional forms asked me about my ethnic identity several decades ago, I started answering "academic," first as a joke, but with increasing conviction over time. The academic world is the one that I affiliate with, that has people I enjoy being around, that is the place where I feel at home. Whenever I have felt rootless in my travels, a visit to a local university campus would give me a sense of belonging. Even today, I prefer to travel not as a tourist or a leisured vacationer, but to be attached to an academic community—teaching, giving talks, or just hanging out at the snack bar. So when I reached the university as a student, it felt like finally I had found my home, finally leaving the houses and people I had grown up with, who had already been leaving my life. But this new academic home was also filled with troubles, turmoil, mood swings, and suicidal thoughts.

Family Troubles

After my parents' divorce I had only a bit of contact with my father, and even less after he moved to Chicago and remarried. He did not seem particularly supportive of my academic interests nor my attending an Ivy League school—he had graduated the public City College with a business degree, and looked towards more practical success. Years later, long after his death, after I had achieved economic comfort and was a successful department administrator, I had a feeling he would have approved. I did visit him and his second wife in Chicago briefly the summer of 1963, but because he was hospitalized with a heart attack, I spent most of the trip at the home of a college friend in that city. My father died a year and a half later at age 48. I flew out for his funeral, missing the final exams in the middle of my sophomore year. My professors kindly allowed me to skip or postpone final exams and papers. My emotions at the funeral and after were muted as he had not played much of a role in my life for many years, and certainly not since my parents' divorce when I was 13. I felt guilt for not feeling more, and sought father figures in the ensuing years, mostly among academic mentors.

My mother remained a haunting and unpleasant presence in my life, despite my trying to distance myself from her. That distancing process itself was a struggle that went on many years until her death in 1974 at age 58 and even beyond. During my college years I remained in contact with her and stayed in her apartment when I had no alternative. Although she had spent on herself my education funds, I still relied on occasional small checks from her. Following phone calls with her when she would repeat my father's alleged misdeeds and other conspiratorial theories, I would be deeply distressed about the world's cruelty and have suicidal thoughts or desires to retreat to a monastery. As I tried to express to

some of my housemates my struggles and my intense dislike of my mother, none seemed to be sympathetic and I was accused by some as being overly dramatic and self-pitying. Only when I was to enter into therapy a few years later did I begin to gain some peace with this estrangement.

I still occasionally met with my brother until his death in 2003 at age 63, but the experience became increasingly unpleasant as he seemed to enjoy baiting me for my interests, my politics, even my savings. Since he was four and a half years older than me, his experience of the household was very different than mine and he had his own struggles.

Lost in the Academy

While these family pains weighed on me, particularly as an undergraduate, I never doubted that the academic world was the right place for me. I achieved enough appreciation and reward from some within the academic world to feel that here were at least some people like me. While I often enough ran into people who were conventional and narrow, I also was able to find people of fresh, unconventional, articulate views that helped expand my own vision and with whom I connected. This sense of academic belonging started during my high school experience in the Columbia Science Honors Program, and was confirmed by my years at Telluride House at Cornell. But life at Telluride also was troubling, ultimately leaving me again feeling the outsider, confused and rejected in my sense of difference, even though it was hard to imagine a future outside the academy. By the time of graduate school, I was very much at loose ends, which only became resolved when I started inner city teaching. In this chapter I want to recapture the state of turmoil in my undergraduate years and how that influenced my trajectory of writing development.

I have in previous chapters discussed my evaluations and unhappiness with physics, political science, and German literature. I have presented these as largely intellectual issues of articulating and assessing my personal values and seeing how they matched with the values I saw embedded in those fields. But that search for values started in my sense of displacement from my family—and the resulting need to find my own meanings and purposes in my life and life projects—accompanied with the need to find mentors and surrogate parents. That sense of alienation and rejection was also in the cultural and political air as the intellectual and countercultural malaise of the fifties moved into the radical politics of the sixties (one of my high school friends later commented the only thing that made him proud of the high school we went to was to discover Lenny Bruce had gone there twenty years before). That personal and societal alienation may also have increased the resistant style of my writing—deeply unsettled and unhappy, but often filtered through irony and parody.

This personal emotional stress played out during my college years among my friends at Telluride House. While I invested my greatest hope and greatest

identification in this special place, I found the environment complex, troubling, and painful. Everyone in the house was idiosyncratic and quirky, as talented students tended to be, each seeking their own path. At first my own quest and troubles were accepted as a matter of course in such a quirky community. We were in constant dialog over our intellectual quests and fundamental values as well as the latest ideas we were getting from our courses and readings. Telluride was making early efforts to diversify, though still largely in token numbers. Women started to be resident in the house during my time there. Our affiliation with Deep Springs also brought some rural students from western states. Nonetheless, the house still was preponderately eastern, urban, and male, disproportionately from professional families. Yet for me it was a much more diverse and exciting environment than I had experienced in my suburban high school.

The house also gave special access to the campus resources. Many of the speakers brought to campus would be invited to receptions and dinners, and stayed in our guest rooms, so we got to hear more from them and could engage in dialog late at night and over breakfast. We lost the awe of being in their presence, and would ask challenging questions and engage in arguments—even with Nobelists. Of course, we often imagined we had gotten the better of them and told anecdotes to each other about our own purported cleverness, though we did appreciate when they had great comebacks to cut us down to size.

Madame Frances Perkins, the Secretary of Labor under Franklin Roosevelt and the first woman cabinet member, spent her final years in the house prior to her passing in May 1965. She was an inspiration to all of us. Another multi-year faculty guest during this same period, however, was much more problematic for me, though many of my fellow students found him a life-changing mentor. Alan Bloom's presence and his association with the political philosopher Leo Strauss became a defining feature of the house. His mentees came to dominate the leadership of the house and their views pervaded all the institutional and daily evaluation processes. Over the ensuing decades a number of them were to become part of the neo-con brain-trust influencing U.S. government policy. That cult commitment (as I soon came to see it) became a large problem for my existence in the house. Some of my close friends with already solidly formed identities in the arts and humanities could keep their distance from the Bloom coterie, viewing them as an interesting curiosity. But in my quest for values, identity, and community, I was torn between wanting to be accepted by the Bloom cult and following my own lights. I was not persuaded by what seemed to me to be unintelligible assumptions and an arrogant sense that they knew better than others how others should be governed. While questions they raised about the nature of governance, its relation to the way of life, and our responsibility as citizens were deeply engaging to me, I could not follow down their Straussian paths and their search for hidden wisdom of ancient philosophers. I was in fact quite baffled by how such apparently smart people could accept such doctrines, except perhaps that it fed the sense of personal superiority we all hung onto.

Over time they became disappointed with me and I with them. My personal emotional struggles became a further reason for me to be categorized as an unreliable outsider—a viewpoint fostered by Bloom for his own reasons, perhaps to create greater cohesion within his coterie. This rejection by Bloom was particularly painful, as I sought his approval even in my difference, as I quixotically hoped he would value my independence of thought. The result was that I was not elected to house leadership roles, and then I was rejected from association membership at the end of the second year (the usual point at which it was granted). Then unusually, they continued my house scholarship, along with another friend deemed not yet ready for association membership. As far as I know this was the first time people had been continued in the house without being granted membership after two years. I took the rejection emotionally very hard. I cried inconsolably for several days. I continued to live in the house the next fall, because of financial need as well as no other sense of social identity, but I became more of an outsider. I then left for Peace Corps training in the spring term, escaping a difficult situation while I continued to deal with my father's death, estrangement from my family, and disillusionment in my majors.

Hiatus and Return

The structured life of Peace Corps training gave me some equanimity. The press of constant language lessons and preparation for community work asked for little writing and left me little time or energy to pursue much of my own. But the program I was assigned to, to lead a YMCA in Venezuela, did not match my interests or even basic competence, and I realized I belonged back at the university. Nonetheless, the break did me good and allowed me to return somewhat cleansed of my most troubled perspectives. So before placement in Venezuela, I returned to Cornell and applied once again for Telluride membership and scholarship. Again I was rejected for association membership while still being awarded room and board scholarship. This was even more unusual than the previous time. But by this time I was hardened to it, and knew the scholarship and the friendships I maintained meant that I simply had to deal with what I perceived as an overall unwelcoming environment.

The three annual applications I submitted for renewal of the fellowship (and which I have copies of) track my unsettled emotional condition and search for values and identity over my college years. The questions each year asked me to reflect on my education, career objectivities, community activities, practical work, readings, philosophic view, and the purpose of the association. In all the applications my diction was informal and personal, and the organization loose and associative as I tried to explain myself.

The application at the end of my first year was self-absorbed in my confusions, disillusionment with science, and need to find meaning. My voice was critical, but also self-abnegating, doubting my high school and work experience, and dubious about what I was learning at the university, although I relied on papers I had written for courses to articulate the important realizations I had come to.

Figure 10.1. A young seeker. Courtesy of Charles Bazerman.

After my second year I expressed my desire to take a year off from college, but recognized the constraint of the draft. My personal and life philosophy essays discussed my confusion about the directions of my life, including rejection of physics. I questioned the discipline's objectifying perspective and the focus far from daily life. I expressed a desire to explore the world and follow my "romantic" impulse, to find out how life might be different elsewhere. I have a brief discussion of my participation in the drama club but dismiss its importance, calling it just fun. My work the previous summer as a counselor in a camp for inner city children I saw as more meaningful, revealing the damage poverty had on the children. Trying to understand the children was the first seed of what was to become a calling a few years later. I do mention a non-classroom text—Harrington's *The Other America*. But my essay on my reading was a literature paper on Restoration comedy. This was the first application which was rejected for association membership, to my deep dismay.

I completed the third application just after returning from Peace Corps training. Two papers from my course on dramatic literature discussed in the next chapter were the center of my application. I introduced these papers as part of my formulating a new attitude of acceptance towards life, explaining how they helped me frame new perspectives which I kept thinking about during my time away from school, and how it took me months to understand the implications of what I had realized through writing these papers. My essay on practical work experience discussed working with underprivileged children—as a camp counselor, as a Head Start assistant teacher, and during my Peace Corps training. From these experiences I learned that local needs, local perceptions, and local control were crucial and that mutual understanding, cultural relativity, and individual experiences and perspectives presented challenges to collaboration. Coming in with good intentions was quixotic and you needed to work with what people wanted. Although I did not recognize it at the time, this was setting up attitudes, values, and perspectives that would lead me to teaching and to the orientations I would have toward student development, local control, and phenomenological diversity. It was also distancing myself further from the budding philosopher-kings in the house who thought they knew what was best for large categories of others.

These three applications were written simply, with little attempt at crafted wit, but by the third I had clear standpoint and voice telling a coherent story from a coherent standpoint rather than from the self-abnegating, doubt-filled, and confused stance with broken sentences and broken narrative in the earlier ones. Interestingly though, in the third, I talked at one point of myself in third person, to describe my meanderings—literally putting myself in perspective and giving an account of this character.

In my last year at the house, my personal journey took another turn (discussed at the end of the next chapter) which allowed me to live in the house while distancing myself from the culture and values that pervaded it. Yet, for years, the house would recurrently appear in my dreams every time I had an intense intellectual experience. As painful as my years at Telluride were, they were a kind of refiner's fire that elicited more coherent reasoning, detailed precision, and higher standards of ethical and civic engagement. Those years fostered a seriousness of purpose and desire to contribute, driving professional commitments and writing to follow.

Personal Struggles, Building Reflective Strength, and Professional Voice

Why are these personal struggles relevant to understanding my writing development? First, after years of growing complexity in my writing which I continued working on in some academic work, I was developing a simple, direct voice that could tell a coherent narrative about my feelings and values. I was to mobilize

this style increasingly throughout my career—to communicate with students, in my textbooks, and administrative documents. I was also in a few years to use this voice during a period of writing poetry and fiction narratives, which in turn prepared me for some historical and other qualitative narratives, as well as autobiographical reflections and attempts to make my theory as transparent as I could.

In dealing with these challenges, I also developed a habit of narrating and reflecting on what I was doing and where I was going. I was starting to articulate to myself and others a coherent story about who I was, what I valued, and the kinds of actions that made sense to me. This was to guide me in my later choices and projects no matter how arcane they may have seemed to others. Later, as my pedagogy and research developed, I was to write a string of texts that attempted to explain the coherence and meaning in my work, integrating the relation among my research, my experience, and my teaching. I kept trying to explain to others the relation I found in the parts of my work, which in part would lead me to the kinds of theorizing I discuss in Chapter 23.

I was also building strength and confidence in expressing what I saw despite how others might evaluate what I wrote. I became willing to assert what evidence, reason, and compassion showed me. I stopped looking for authoritative wisdom but became willing to accept whatever extended my vision and showed me light through the murkiness of difficult times. I would like to think during these times I began to open myself up to an awareness of others, their perspectives, their needs, and their struggles. This too has guided my writing in the subjects I take on, and in the stance I take towards the people I discuss and the people I communicate with. Perhaps you will see these themes reverberating through the other chapters of this book, where I attribute like developments to other experiences and causes, but I believe they rest on the personal struggles that lay beneath them all. For several years these lines from Wordsworth kept running through my mind: "A deep distress hath humanized my soul" (Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont, 1807).

When I first approached writing this chapter, I thought it would be a trauma narrative, to explain the confusions and stresses I felt and how that was connected to my writing in college. But now I see it as a narrative of writing my way out of the trauma into a positive trajectory for my later writing life. It helped me make sense of my experience and allowed me to face the future. In doing so, my writing gained a simplicity and focus that made possible more complex projects. These years crystallized a commitment to writing as a way of life. The next chapter, which covers academic work just before and after my hiatus makes a bit more visible how the academic analytic transformations went hand in hand with this more personal formulation of consciousness.