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Tom Christenson

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DISCERNING VOCATION: PERSONAL RECOLLECTIONS

Tom Christenson

Why I Became a Professor

I grew up just two blocks from the college campus where my father worked. He was not on the faculty. In spite of that many of the students called him "Doc." He was a steam engineer given the responsibility of keeping the showers hot, the radiators warm, the whole place running. As a child I enjoyed visiting him in the "boiler room," his place of work. I liked the pungent smell of hot steel and the machinery of the pumps. Besides, there was always coffee, donuts and a small circle of folks in conversation.

Often after school I would stop in to see my dad and hang around until he was ready to walk home from work. On many of those days I would spend the hour between four and five in the afternoon wandering around campus, peeking into rooms, labs and offices. I remember the vacated classrooms, remnants of lessons left on their chalkboards. There I came upon traces of worlds described in foreign tongues, in Greek and Latin, in German and French, in the calculi of math and physics, and very often in English terms that weren't part of my elementary school vocabulary. I remember the smells and sights of the laboratories — formaldehyde and skeletons and all sorts of glass apparatus and organic and inorganic chemicals. The art department also had its identifying smells, sometimes clay, sometimes oil paints. It was fun to look in from week to week to see works in process. But of most interest to me were the faculty and staff who were still around in the late afternoon. There was a biology prof with a giant moustache who looked like a walrus. A theology prof with Harpo Marx hair had two desks in his office that he paced between. There was a music prof who was about 6'10" tall with reddish blond hair, a giraffe-like neck, and a high counter-tenor voice. There was the librarian who regarded my looking at books with suspicion, guarding them as if they were her very own. The art professor would say to me every time I'd peek into his space, "I like to draw pictures. Do you draw pictures?" There was the professor of mathematics who had a blackboard in her office. As I watched through her open door she wrote proofs with her right hand and erased them immediately with her left. There was a very near sighted man who paced the hallway of his building with his nose almost touching the slim volume he held open in his hand. On the cover was only one word, "Novalis." I found all these characters simultaneously fascinating and frightening.

For me walking through those nearly deserted buildings was like a trip to wonder-land. It was a world of unreality in a way, a journey into world of imagination, into an intellectual play-space. But most of all it was a bedlam of weird folks. People who, though in adult bodies, seemed to be child spirits arrested in their development who were "confined" to this institution to play out their days. The college campus was, from my point of view, a kind of menagerie for the mentally sharp but developmentally retarded. It was a place where people seemed to be happily institutionalized in ways that removed them from the cares of the ordinary world. That gave them all the time they wanted to pursue their peculiar interests. Like a zoo, it was a great place for a kid to visit, but I then thought, not a place a normal person would want to reside.

But as I advanced through my teen years, through high school and then college I came to discover that, in fact, I was not a normal person at all. Many of my peers, and a few of my parents' friends, started pointing out to me that I was weird. I had a high school teacher who even told me I was the weirdest person he had ever met. When I came, finally, to accept the truth of what they said I was relieved to know that there was a place for me and people like me. So after the appropriate induction and certification I moved in, and except for a few years when I was sprung to the outside world, I have remained happily confined here ever since. I am very thankful there are such places as colleges and universities, places where people can pass their lives drawing pictures, studying the sex-life of waterfowl, learning and perfecting the grammar of a no longer spoken language, reading the works of a single author over and over again, teaching a complete fiction like economics as if it were reality, teaching mice and rats to do tricks, blowing a horn. An asylum for child-like minds building towers of intellectual blocks and then knocking them down, that's where I belong. It's that sense of fit that makes me a professor.

Why I am a Philosopher

When I was a junior in high school I took a class in physics. Well into the class our teacher, who always wore brown suits, was introducing to us Bernoulli's principle — that faster moving fluids (such as air) have a lower pressure than slower moving or stationary fluids. This principle is exemplified by the fact that smoke exits the window of a

moving car, that an airplane wing has lift, that we can sail a sailboat into the wind, etc. After hearing all of this I raised my hand and asked the teacher why this was so. He said, with a sense of satisfaction, "Because of Bernoulli's principle." I then asked, "But why is Bernoulli's principle true?" He said, "Because faster moving fluids have a lower pressure than slower moving fluids." I looked around the room for reinforcement but found everyone else was busy writing down what he said, making sure to get the spelling of "Bernoulli" right. But I was still puzzled. His answer had not really advanced my understanding so I said, "And this is true because ---?" "Because of Bernoulli's principle," he replied, now obviously agitated by what must have seemed like my unrelenting stupidity. I paused for a while considering whether I shouldn't give up and be silent. But finally I blurted, "Is 'because of Bernoulli's principle' really an answer at all? Isn't it just a name for our ignorance?"

At that point he gave me an angry look and growled,

"Christenson, you're nothing but a damn philosopher."

He was, as it turned out, correct. At that time I did not know what a philosopher was, but I could sense from his tone and the accompanying adjective that it was not a particularly good thing to be. I won't argue the virtues of philosophy here, but I have usually seen my inclination towards philosophy as a gift, but occasionally I understand that everyone else does not see it that way. I continue to this day being puzzled by what others take to be significant knowledge. I have over the years compiled a fairly long list of things that we parade as knowledge that seem to me to be "names for our ignorance." But calling or curse, whichever way I look at it, I know this twist of mind is something I am stuck with. One of my colleagues recently introduced me as "an unrepentant philosopher." I am guilty as charged.

Tom Christenson is professor of philosophy at Capital University. The college he roamed as a child was Concordia College, Moorhead Minnesota.