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Happy Birthday, Mr. Mark Twain!: Reflections on a Writer, a Scholar, and Teaching and Learning

November 30 is Mark Twain's birthday—or more precisely, Samuel Clemens's birthday: "Mark Twain" was born in February 1863, the first appearance of the pen name on a newspaper article. His birthday is a special day to me, since I have devoted my scholarly life to reading, writing, and teaching about him.

All of us in the faculty have a specialized research interest. One of the great things about a university is that it is a place populated by smart people who know so much about otherwise obscure and narrow subjects. My service on department, college, and university personnel committees has allowed me to see what my colleagues devote their lives to. I usually don't understand the topics, but I am impressed by the wealth of knowledge we share.

My interest in Mark Twain goes back to the dinner table. Every time we had cauliflower for dinner, my father would say, "Mark

Twain said 'Cauliflower is cabbage with a college education.'" I didn't fully understand what he meant, but the name and the words stuck with me. (A college-educated cabbage now, I do understand at last.)

When I was in the fifth grade, my teacher, Mrs. Hathcock, read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* to us, a chapter or two every Friday afternoon over the course of the year. I was enchanted, by the humor and by Tom's antics, but also by Twain's insight into adolescent psychology—even if I did not understand the terms then.

My interest in Twain grew as I read more of his works, first in high school with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, then in college with another visit to Huck's world, then on to *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, *Pudd'n'head Wilson*, *Letters From the Earth*, and *The Mysterious Stranger*. I felt a kinship

with Mark Twain, a person who had died half a century before I was born.

Even though I was advised against it in graduate school, I wrote my dissertation on a single author—Mark Twain, of course. My first published article, about the pattern of Huck's lying, helped get me my first job. I have worked on other authors and topics in the decades since, but the bulk of my work has been on Mr. Mark Twain.

When I interviewed for a job at Winthrop in 1993, after teaching for six years at Converse College, the chair of the English Department at that time, the late Bill Sullivan, asked me what my scholarly goals were. "What do you want to achieve?" Bill asked. Immediately I responded, "I want to be a nationally-known Mark Twain scholar."

I sat there astonished at the words that had just come out of my mouth. I don't think I had ever consciously thought that.

“Mark Twain is an interesting figure when it comes to teaching and learning. His formal education ended at age 12, after the fifth grade, his father having died the year before. Young Sam became a printer’s apprentice and then a typesetter, which in a way continued his education. He left home for good at 18, taking jobs as a journeyman printer in New York City, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Cincinnati. Alone at nights, he habituated reading rooms and public libraries, continuing a lifelong habit of voracious and avid reading.”



Continued from page 1

But the words came, and they resonated in my brain for years. At the time, I was in the midst of writing a conference paper on Twain’s “Jumping Frog” and metaphor. Year by year as I taught my four classes a semester at Winthrop, I gave more papers on the topic of Mark Twain and metaphor, until I had enough for a book with that title, published nearly a decade ago, in 2007.

And even before then I realized I had achieved the goal that had so surprised me that that March day in 1993. I had become a nationally-known Mark Twain scholar. At Winthrop!

I am not alone in achieving such a goal while teaching here at this small to mid-size regional university. Many members of the Winthrop faculty are nationally-known in their research disciplines. I think this fact should be a big encouragement to younger faculty members. As Henry David Thoreau wrote in *Walden*, “If one advances confidently in the direction of one’s dreams, and endeavors to live the life which one has imagined, one will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.” That has certainly proved true for me, as it has for many others. Keep

advancing!

Mark Twain is an interesting figure when it comes to teaching and learning. His formal education ended at age 12, after the fifth grade, his father having died the year before. Young Sam became a printer’s apprentice and then a typesetter, which in a way continued his education. He left home for good at 18, taking jobs as a journeyman printer in New York City, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Cincinnati. Alone at nights, he habituated reading rooms and public libraries, continuing a lifelong habit of voracious and avid reading.

Despite his carefully-crafted persona as a simple humorist, Mark Twain was a self-taught expert on many subjects. His reading was vast, including the classics of literature of several countries, but also history, science, and theology. He was particularly interested in geology, and he participated in several archeological digs in upstate New York. At one point, he read widely about the lives of bees and ants. Mark Twain the geologist? Mark Twain the entomologist?

He was fluent in German and French, as a reader,

speaker, and writer, although he hid this example of cosmopolitanism from his public. He was at perfect ease with presidents, diplomats, kings and queens, lords and ladies—as well as the common people from which he sprang. He was truly a genius, even if only a select few knew that in his lifetime.

Twain was an advocate for and a living example of lifelong learning. As a scholar myself, I am humbled by the depth and breadth of his knowledge. As a teacher, I am humbled by how much he taught America and the world, hiding behind a mantle of humor. Happy birthday, Mr. Mark Twain! May you continue to live forever.

The Fourth Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning will be held Friday, March 24, 2017. Look for the call for papers very soon. The conference rate will be as low as we can keep it, but the quality of the presentations will be as high as we can all achieve. Save the date, and look for the call! And here we stand at the end of another semester. See you next year for more adventures in teaching and learning.

Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Register for a TLC Session
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The 4th Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning 3/24/17

The 4th Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning will be held Friday, March 24, 2016. The call for papers and proposals will be coming soon!

Thought For the Week

"Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond; cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education."
--Mark Twain