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Why Do You Do That Thing You Do? - Reflections of a Reading Nerd and College-Educated Cabbage

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Why Do You Do That Thing You Do?— Reflections of a Reading Nerd and College-Educated Cabbage

Why do you do what you do? What influences in your life led you to your field of study and major interest?

Why was I an English major in college? I didn't start out to be one; like many students, I changed majors. I started out as a Radio, TV, and Motion Picture major at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. My years of running around the neighborhood with my father's Super 8 movie camera making short films made me want to be a filmmaker. That ambition did not last through my freshman year, and neither did I; I dropped out of college after, or more properly, *during* my freshman year.

A year and a half or so of working at a small insulation plant rolling fiberglass for duct work and at Chic-fil-a (surprisingly similar jobs) convinced me to go back to school. When I arrived at Appalachian State in August of 1975 and they asked me what my major was, out of my mouth

popped the word "English."

Even though it seems that I did not put much thought into what would become my life's work, my instinct was based on years of achievement and interest. English was always my best subject, both literature and language. I even loved grammar.

Thinking back, I realize how much I was in love with language from a very early age. I remember a time when I was four or five, sitting in the backyard scratching the few letters I could make onto a board with a nail. I just loved the shapes of letters, the feel of words in my mouth. I ached for the time when I would know all the letters and could form words with them and could read.

Ah, reading! I was such a voracious reader from the very start. I would go to the library and check out the limit of books. My parents would have to force me to stop reading so I would go out and play. My mother had to

drag me away from my book to come to the dinner table. And I was caught more than once with a flashlight and a book under the covers. Why sleep when there is a book to read?

In junior high and high school, as I began a more serious study of literature, I loved learning new ways to think about the books I was reading. While other students resisted analyzing what they had to read, I took to it immediately. My 11th grade English teacher, Miss Royce Ann Williams, introduced me to American literature classics like *The Scarlet Letter*, *Walden*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *the Sound and the Fury*. I should have known then that the die was cast.

My love for literature and language deepened as I pursued my major in English at Appalachian. My professor Thomas McGowan entranced me in his Chaucer class and in his History of the English Language class.

“When I interviewed for my job at Winthrop in 1993, after six years at another school and a bit of publication on Twain, the late Bill Sullivan, then the chair of the English Department, asked me what I wanted to do, what was my goal. I immediately answered, “I want to be a nationally-known Mark Twain scholar.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I was astonished. (I see now that this was like my saying I wanted to be an English major many years before.)”



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For a time, because of him, I was very nearly a medievalist!

But the roots of American literature ran deep, and that was the way I turned. Two years of teaching high school English, most of it in the 11th grade, fortunately, where I could emulate Miss Williams, only deepened that attachment. My fate was fully sealed when I returned for an MA and wrote my thesis on Mark Twain’s bawdy short piece, *1601* (look it up—you won’t believe it). I stuck with Mark Twain in my PhD program, this time culminating in a dissertation on his narrative use of first person.

Why Mark Twain? Those roots run deep too. I first heard the name from my father. Every time we would eat cauliflower, and I mean *every single time*, he would say, “Mark Twain said cauliflower is cabbage with a college education.” I am not sure where he encountered that aphorism from Twain’s “Pudd’nhead Wilson’s Calendar,” and I surely did not understand the saying, which actually begins, “Training is everything.” Twain was right—and little did I know that I would grow up to be that college-educated cabbage.

Mark Twain came at me again in the fifth grade, when my teacher, Mrs. Hathcock, read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* aloud to our class on Friday afternoons. The novel delighted me, as it still does. When I heard that Twain had written a sequel, I sought it out and read it on my own. Too young to read the great *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but something must surely have stuck with me.

A couple of years later, in 1967, I remember watching Hal Holbrook in the CBS special “Mark Twain Tonight!” I was transfixed by his impersonation of Mark Twain the man. I was especially awed by the idea that he came in with Halley’s Comet and said he would go out with it—and then he did. How cosmic! (At 13, I had the idea that the comet came on a single night, which made his claim all the more remarkable.)

So the roots were there early on for me. My subsequent reading and study confirmed me in my attraction to Mark Twain, and now I see that I have devoted my adult academic life in trying to understand and talk about and teach about and write about this man who died in 1910, as Halley’s Comet was making its

return.

When I interviewed for my job at Winthrop in 1993, after six years at another school and a bit of publication on Twain, the late Bill Sullivan, then the chair of the English Department, asked me what I wanted to do, what was my goal. I immediately answered, “I want to be a nationally-known Mark Twain scholar.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I was astonished. (I see now that this was like my saying I wanted to be an English major many years before.)

A few years ago, to my further astonishment, I realized that I had achieved that goal. I have published a good bit on Mark Twain, including a book. I am now, to my astonishment, president of the Mark Twain Circle of America. A few years ago, I got to meet Hal Holbrook and give him a cigar—and then smoke a cigar with him. Wow! Almost like meeting my Mark Twain, sharing a cigar with the person I have devoted my intellectual life to.

Why do you do what you do? Why are you in the field you are in? Why do you have that specialty? I would like to hear your stories—and I will share them if you will let me.

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.

We also thank those of you who have attended TLC sessions. Your time is valuable, and we appreciate you taking some of it to enrich yourself through professional and personal development.

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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.

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The 2nd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Many thanks to the presenters and attendees at our 2nd Annual Conference on Teaching and Learning, Saturday, January 31, 2015. It was a great day! Make plans to join us next year. Special thanks to TLC program coordinator Dana Bruneau for making the conference run so smoothly!

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