

Running Head: As Quiet as it's Kept

As Quiet as it's Kept:
The Life of Theory within the Life of A Teacher

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A girl melodically whines in the background. "Stop," Frank says. An acoustic guitar softly strums a collection of power chords that quickly build into sharp piercing percussion. An electric guitar joins, the whining continues – louder and somehow more purposeful – yet this time she is allowed to continue. Ten seconds pass while the melody increases until Frank again speaks: "With your feet in the air and your head on the ground/ Try this trick and spin it, yeah/ Your head will collapse, but there's nothing in it, and you'll ask yourself/ Where is my mind?" (Francis, 1988, no.7). I sit here for a moment in wonderment about this question that has teasingly tagged along hidden just behind me for as long as I can remember. In song, The Pixies answer the question metaphorically: "Way out on the water, see it swimming." "How perfect," I thought sarcastically. A question that once playfully flirted in my thoughts thus suddenly gave me a concussion.

Music, to me, has always been inspiration for thought: A way for me to relate to others far away in time and space. Today, as I stand again beside my truck staring at both the Atlantic Ocean and another day spent watching two yellow lines zip along an empty stretch of coastal highway, that song is all I can think about. I suddenly understand that if I can answer its question that was first asked of a child nearly twenty years ago, I will finally be able to rest as an adult. My mind, as Descartes put it, is certainly housed within my body "more intimately than a pilot in a ship" (in Raymond, 1991, p. 369) and it falls clumsily, ceaselessly, to the extent that I can't always control, or define who I am. This struggle, this grappling that is between my individual, sometimes clear, peaceful, subjective being and all that is within materialistic intersubjectivity, has been killing me slowly. I have realized, as did Stevenson's main character, that "I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck: that man is not truly one, but truly two"

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(1904, p. 383). I am one person, yet inherently I know two intimately who are engaged in an abusive struggle for control of this being.

I drive, I stare, I listen, I think, I stop, and I come to terms with things. I watch the streams, marshes, fields of green, and beachscapes fly by and I remain somewhere between the moment at hand and the struggle within my own mind. I pass a sign for my Mother's hometown and temporarily wish for some connection, but quickly remember what is at hand. Like Thoreau, I know I must "(a)s long as possible live free and uncommitted" (Thoreau, 1854/1947, p. 337) because I know, as did Kerouac (1959), that "somewhere along the line the pearl [will] be handed to me" (p. 8). This road offers me freedom, and my loneliness remains uncommitted. I've left my job, left my friends, left my place and all those material objects that allowed me to, when truth came knocking at the door, tell it "Go away, I'm looking for the truth," only to watch it turn and again disappear (Pirsig, 1974, p. 5). I have traded it all for a temporary moment in obscurity. Here I'm not going anywhere; here I'm not too busy to be genuine; here I am in the "hereness and the newness of things" (Pirsig, 1974, p. 5); here I'm part of the unitary "Being-in-the-world" - the *Daesin* as suggested by Heidegger (1962, p. 250); here my life is all I have.

Perhaps others can understand that when your mind can't stop racing, being alone is a curse - yet I have put myself on this journey for a specific reason. I'm a teacher... and lately I can't help but wonder the extent to which a rotting darkness has surely inhabited my thoughts and interrupted my practice. If our experiences inform our thoughts, and if our thoughts are thus translated into beliefs, our decisions must somehow be born of such parents. Through this process our life as lived shows us who we are and, when interrogated, can show us who we hope to become. These thoughts are mostly overlooked in our professional development seminars. When understood in terms of *currere*, however, that ability to "explore the complex relation

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between the temporal and conceptual” (Pinar, 1974, p. 19) becomes necessary. Yet here, in this moment, I cannot understand the firing of my mind much less see how its light might be translated. How, then, can I hope to remain a teacher when my own source has thereby been compromised?

In the seminal *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), Robert Pirsig called them “Chautauquas” (p. 7), but using time to think about things that seem important has been called meditation by some. If this is anything of real value, for me it could be called something different: with respect to Petra Munro (1998), I think I’ll call it something else - my own attempt at discovering my Life of Theory. Like Toni Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1985), this attempt too will hold a secret that aches to remain “Quiet as it’s kept” (p.1). Somewhere within my subconscious I know this secret. Somewhere on the pavement between these shoulders I know I’ll meet it. Today, as I head north along this coastal highway hoping to avoid Philadelphia’s traffic, I imagine Jack Kerouac or Robert Pirsig sitting next to me. Perhaps they, with reinforcements from many others, can help me try to create and then believe in an illusion that will allow my identity to be gathered and “neatly boxed” within a theoretical framework created by someone else (Munro, 1998, p. 17). I’m very happy I brought a backpack.

I

I’ve carried around a pebble from a rocky coastline in Maine since I was eight years old. It’s with me today because it just happened to be in that space under the radio where coins, rubber bands, batteries, and all kinds of other junk accumulate. Eight years old - that’s how old I was when my grandmother died. I remember everything about the conversation I had with my mother on that day: I was fighting a war with my GI-Joes on the back porch of our old house, wearing my favorite army pants and jacket, when she called me over. I knew something had

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happened because I had heard the phone call and watched all the sad people come over soon afterward, but I didn't understand what or why. I came and sat next to my Mom - beside the honey suckle - with that innocent one-third-playful, one-third-scared, and one-third-sad feeling only a young child can truly mimic. She told me Grandma was someplace else and she would stay there forever. I remember jumping down off the porch and taking my toys to the creek. I couldn't sleep for a week.

My dreams were haunted by the loneliness of space with no life of which to observe its beauty. I recall vividly a continued dream in which I travelled amongst the planets aligned in a cosmic science project. Flying past Earth and Jupiter, and towards Pluto, I could see nothing but darkness beyond. This image literally haunted me every time I closed my eyes. Although eight, I knew what I was thinking about: if there were no life at all on Earth to see such things, would they still exist? I knew the world would exist without humans, but the loneliness I felt in thinking about nine planets orbiting a sun with no life to bear witness was torturous. How bleak would such a universe be? Where would life go? Where indeed did my Grandma go? Given the law of Conservation of Energy – that energy can neither be created nor destroyed – what would happen to all that life if such a scenario were to come true? In *Existentialism* (1973), Macquarrie describes exactly such a place:

If there were no human beings, there might still be galaxies, trees, rocks, and so on – and doubtless there were . . . But what kind of a world is there before conscious beings engage with it? Not an intelligible world, many would want to say. Not a world of meaning. It becomes a world of meaning only when meaning-making beings make sense of it (in Crotty, 1998, p.57)

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Having read this work recently, I became inspired at the depth of my philosophic thought as a child. This is an eight year old attempting to understand the universe in terms of ontology. I did not of course understand this at the time, but today this earliest experience with death began my life as I know it. It is representative of that struggle for meaning that continues today as inspired by Realism – that realities can exist outside of the mind; Platonic objectivism – that meaning exists in objects independent of consciousness; and some confusing outlier that suggests something else is indeed much more present and powerful. Although I am admittedly intrigued with the “Platonic view” of mathematics – the Golden Ratio, Fibonacci numbers, Euclidean geometry – that may link all universal reality (Livio, 2002), such power cannot, for me, be God. Ever since I heard about Jesus walking on water I have been an atheist.

The pebble I carry that did belong to my Grandmother is representative of this place I found myself as an eight year old. This pebble was in that junk-space below my radio by chance alone. It is however, the first artifact collected on this journey. It is now in my backpack.

II

During my sophomore year in college my then girlfriend introduced me to Bruce Springsteen while teaching me how to drive her small stick-shift Toyota Tercel. I remember Janine more screaming than singing the lyrics. She was the kind of girl that made everyone smile; one of those girls that no matter what, always had a good day. Her passion was contagious. Our relationship didn't last long, but my relationship with Bruce did. Years later, this time it was my brother and me leaning on an imaginary microphone (more than likely a bottle of whiskey), our faces nearly touching, as we screamed the lyrics to this same song. But these memories have no use for this Life of Theory: I recently learned of Janine's death by way of a late night head-on collision with a 19 year-old drunk driver. It was his second offense; she

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had just finished her responsibility as “designated driver;” it was 2am; she was a mile from home; and there was no one else on this back country road for hours. The extent of the nihilistic darkness my old friend’s death brought was deeper than any hole in which I have ever fallen.

Despite the alienation from others and the curtain of absurdity that drops over everything in such times, it is comforting to know beyond all doubt that I am not alone. Nihilists and Existentialists inspired by Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, de Beauvoir, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty have long walked about this place before me. Matt Damon’s character in *Good Will Hunting* (1997) has referred to such philosophers as his friends from whom he learns and finds inspiration, yet here I am alone and unprotected by them with nothing but their words and Janine’s death haunting me. When such a good person, a practicing Christian, one who is loved by so many, so kind, and so passionate about life and the living, can be taken so quickly with no explanation, no hint at reason except utter absurdity, I have found it hard to believe that there can be any value or meaning in life at all. Janine was a beautiful person, and my darkness thus goes beyond the “If God is good, how could he allow bad things to happen to good people?” critique. It truly does seem to me, at this moment stuck on the New Jersey Turnpike I had tried to avoid, that what often appears to be nothing more than a life akin to suffering with looming inevitable death makes all purpose, meaning, and projects (or the search for such) absurdly meaningless.

In Tolstoy’s *Confession* (1884), the narrator has a similar experience, growing “sick of life” and almost giving in to that “irresistible force [that was] leading [him] to somehow get rid of it” (p. 151). He found, however, motivation to live in God. I wish I were able to believe. Like Nietzsche however, I too reject dogmatism and all attempts to have the last word. Nothing in this world can be so simple, so positive. Indeed, if there ever were a God that would make life worth living in such a way, Nietzsche tells us he is dead and, in our obsessive attempts to define

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him, "we have killed him" (1974, p. 125). All that remains is a void we must fill, or a life we must construct with our own definition. But, at times like Sartre's Pablo facing death by firing squad (*The Wall*, 1948), life to me has no value, nothing is important, and the existence of utterly random, unexplained and lonely death is perfect proof. All those things I claimed to be important that I hoped would provide definition to this life – my family, my home, my back porch and its honey-suckle, the fresh sting of salt-water on my face, my career – are all worthless because death (like Janine found) is the one thing all are promised. Life is as undeniably heartbreaking as John Travolta's character in *Phenomenon* (1996) eventually concluded: "Everything is [indeed] on its way to somewhere all the time".

"Where am I going?" I thought out-loud. "I might as well head into Manhattan."

III

Existentialism is partly about the truth that exists in the darkness, and thus this darkness should be sought after (Raymond, 1991). Crossing into the heart of one of the world's biggest cities, I could not help but feel like Kurtz heading up river (literally and metaphorically) into the *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad, 1902). Although negative, I will not hide from these thoughts: They are the nature of this struggle; they are my Phaedrus (Pirsig, 1974); they are my Mr. Hyde (Stevenson, 1904). If I hope to find that truth that can define my Life of Theory and reacquaint myself with my mind, I must existentially explore this place.

I knock on my old friend's door around midnight. She has to work tomorrow morning and will be leaving her East Village apartment by 8am. We drink a full glass of wine, laugh and remember sliding down the steps on a mattress, that weight training class we took together, and countless drunken parties, hook-ups, and graduation. I'm now a teacher, I wear tee-shirts - she's

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now an ad-exec for Lexus-Nexus and wears an ironed suit and heels every-single-day. The streets of New York are loud all night, but my head hits the pillow and sleep comes quickly.

As former English majors we continue to have similar interests, and Jenn told me about a bar called Chumley's hidden off of Bedford Street in an old West Village neighborhood that is within walking distance. The prohibition era bar had supposedly been a gathering place for New York's authorial elite: the writers, poets, journalists, activists, members of the Lost and Beat Generations; Willa Cather, e.e. cummings, William Faulkner, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Eugene O'Neill, and John Steinbeck. Walking down the old, shadowed brick streets, I feel almost like an ex-pat roaming the streets of Paris before it was cool to be so disgruntled. There are no signs, no people, no patios, nothing to make me think there is anything here other than a few unassuming townhomes. But this is to be expected: Supposedly, this bar is the definition of *speakeasy*. Once a secret only known by those searching for alcohol during prohibition, the term "to 86" (to hide or get rid of something or stop serving someone) came from this place as a result of its secret back entrance on 86 Barrow Street. Having tossed their whiskey into the always-burning-fire (regardless of season), prohibition era drinkers could easily escape out this door at the first sign of police. I find the door, turn the knob and wonder if, having not provided a secret code, I'm about to be hit with the butt of pistol. The door pushes open into a dark, hard-wooden floor and bench filled room that looks more like it should be in Tombstone, Arizona than the West Village. It smells more like my grandfather's house after a soaking rain than a bar. The fire is not burning, but the stories I have heard are most definitely true.

I order a dark beer and sit alone in a corner booth, content enough with my own company to sit and stare at the walls. The book covers decorating the entire bar, ceiling to floor, are the works of those authors who supposedly frequented these benches. In this setting I have almost

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forgotten Janine's death and the depth of my nihilistic depression. But in my corner, almost as if placed there on purpose by some author writing my own story, I find a simple poem seemingly handwritten by Edna St. Vincent Millay on a long since torn and parched pad: "My candle burns at both ends/ It will not last the night/ But ah my foes, and oh my friends/ It gives such a lovely light" (*First Fig*, 1920).

New York City is, simultaneously, a city of immense wealth and deep poverty; it is as inspiring as it is cruel; it is as happening as it is lonesome. It can truly define what it means to be "alone in a crowd." Jack Kerouac began his journey here (1959); Dylan Thomas ended his. I am not sure about that lovely light given off, but like Millay I know my candle is burning on both ends. I am certainly in the right place. I finish my beer, order another, and sit a while in the presence of ghosts.

Interestingly, Hegel's *dialectic* attempts to explain the relationship of past to present as a "multifaceted interaction" (Crotty, 1998, p.118) between truth and falsity, past and present, and positive and negative. This seems to be exactly where I sit at this very moment: as Marx described the *dialectic*, I too am "essentially at war with (my)self" (Crotty, 1998, p. 118). It is not enough, however, to use the *dialectic* to explain how I feel about this relationship between myself and my past. I cannot, for example, find what Hegel has referred to as the goodness that will inevitably arrive if "the negative always appears with the positive" (Hegel in Raymond, 1991, p. 94). Am I to believe thus that there is to be some positive within Janine's untimely death? If so, would this not question the fairness of the Christian God to whom she prayed? Am I to selfishly assume, because I can see no other positivity born from this tragedy, that the positive within this "fluidity" may be the very fact of my questioning life as a result of her death (Raymond, 1991m p. 94)? This cannot be so, her life cannot have ended so that mine could be

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more valuable – this would prioritize my life over her own and offer a suggestion of some sort of unreasonable, cruel and determinant Power that has arranged all things toward a planned outcome – and that for some reason has chosen me (or some other) to receive positivity from the ending of her life. I cannot believe in this kind of Power that performs good through evil, life through death just as I cannot believe in a benevolent God.

In an inward turn, Heidegger's *Daesin* is suggestive of the kind of "Being-in-the-world" that can claim responsibility for blending the past, present, and future that I have experienced in that unexplainable moment linking my life to Janine's. Unlike the *dialectic* that searches for goodness in pain, Heidegger's explanation is more about filling a void through reciprocity.

How are we to determine this giving of presencing that prevails in the present, in the past, in the future? Does this giving lie in this, that it reaches us, or does it reach us because it is in itself a reaching? The latter. Approaching, being not yet present, at the same time gives and brings about what is no longer present. The reciprocal relation of both at the same time gives and brings about the present. (1962, p. 39)

For Heidegger, *Daesin* does not have a nature; it is by its definition a possibility of what is not yet that can be formed only by "Being there" *in* the world (Raymond, 1991, p. 243). Existence is simultaneously the place "where it arises and to which it returns" (Heidegger in Crotty, 1999, p. 96). In a sense, *Daesin* is thus rooted in temporality comprised of that blending of past, present, and future as we have, are, and will soon experience it. With inspiration from what became Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics, I understand my life explicitly as it is thus affected implicitly by others. In a sense the fact of their existence helps me define my own.

But what of the reality that is pain, dread, and melancholy we all still feel? What of the existential absurdity that is felt in the presence of death as meaning maker? What if, that by

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using their life to provide my own with definition, I begin to feel a sense that this life I live is not really my own? Heidegger again offers a solution.

Specifically, I understand now that my experience of dread is the result of my coming to terms with that meaningless, random, and cruel death of a beautiful person. Such an experience of dread, in Heidegger's terms, comes from our awareness that we too are a "Being-toward-Death" (in Raymond, 1991, p.244). The dread we feel, although it may paralyze us temporarily, can thus remind us of the infinite possibility in things that can exist when we have free will and live freely. When we face this possibility, we can then see that we are free and also that this freedom will end. I will, like all else, someday die. This is not a depressing thought. Rather, as Heidegger suggests, it is inspirational in that I can thus become "free from the illusions of the 'they,' what Heidegger calls *Das Man*, and thereby "individuat(e) each of us and mak(e) authenticity possible" (in Raymond, 1991, p.244). Dread can thus reveal the possibility of Nothing. It is within this possibility of Nothing that, for Heidegger, Being itself is made possible.

IV

A four lane highway somehow feels like cheating. Ninety miles an hour on I- 84 through what I have no doubt is country worth twenty-five on a nameless state road is still not my idea of making "good" time. But as I round over the top of what had been a steady climb, I see the lights of Hartford, Connecticut spread out like Atlantis below me. Luckily my favorite part of the day happens twice a day: Like those early morning moments just before the sun actually peaks up over the horizon, this afternoon's sun, having set about twenty minutes ago, is still winning the battle for the sky throwing a delicately soft blue tint against that sharp dark shadow below. Against this contrast the lights of another dirty city seem beautiful – dark buildings

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silhouetted against a fading blue sky. I am not hungry, I am not tired, the road continues before me and those yellow lines dare me to keep motivated. I know no one in Boston – maybe I'll change that.

Suddenly, as quickly as another car can no doubt tear through the front hood of a Toyota Tercel, a deer appears frozen in my headlights. My life suddenly slows down and I can strangely hear myself think – off the road or change lanes? Which way will the deer go? I choose choice B, change lanes, and miss the deer. Two seconds, one decision. I'm breathing heavily and thinking about my Dad's advice years ago. "Son" he would say, "You should always accelerate, hit the deer quickly and stay alive yourself." I didn't listen, Dad. It was nearly ten minutes later when I realized that I actually changed lanes blindly without paying any attention to cars that may have been beside me. In two seconds I easily could have killed others and/or myself trying to save a deer. I wish I were smart enough to understand the implications of that decision. Heidegger and others have already made it very clear that we are all going to die, but I'm not ok with taking someone (or something) with me. If life is absurd, if life is meaningless, how can I myself be ok with my own death, but not that of others? What indeed is the nature of this relationship I have with the Other? I feel another chautauqua coming along.

According to Descartes' *dualism*, our knowledge of our mind is better than our knowledge of our bodies. In his words, "nothing can be more easy and more evidently perceived by me than my mind" (in Raymond, 1991, p.369). If this is the case, since we alone have access to our self and no other, we can never truly know what the Other is experiencing and thus can therefore never truly know another (Raymond, 1991, p. 369). What then is love? What is hate? Are they brothers born from the same mother within our own mind, or are they opposites on a continuum of emotion? Are they imaginary, possibly something created by our own minds in

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order to not allow ourselves to feel so alone in this world of contingency? It seems likely, as Sartre (1956) as described it, that there is an ever-present conflict in our Being-for Others in which we try to define ourselves in terms of the Other by making an object of the Other. In light of this understanding, either we must become an object for the other, or the other will have to become an object for us. This carries powerful implications when the existence of love, the fact that was Nazi Germany, racism, power relationships, and supposed altruistic attempts at social justice are considered.

It's very late. Like an inflatable auto-pilot, I must have allowed my body to take over while my mind wandered. I find myself pulling into the North End of Boston where I know of a decent hotel that backs up against Long Wharf and Faneuil Square. As I check in I realize that I have just put myself in a position where I will know no one, and thus experiences with the Other will be mandatory. Perhaps this is a good thing: I need a new outlook. I do not remember going to sleep, but the morning sure came quickly. I know the magnificent history of Boston and have heard that the Freedom Trail is absolutely a must see. I grab a tourist map from the concierge and head off for a firsthand history lesson.

As it turns out, Faneuil Square was built in 1742 by Peter Faneuil, one of the area's wealthiest merchants, to serve as a market and meeting place for the citizens of Boston. From 1760 through the Revolutionary War, meetings (often violently spilling out into the square) were held in what became Faneuil Hall. Awkwardly nestled in the shadow of immense high rises that today are so indicative of how distracted we are to our own history, the building is an amazing piece of colonial architecture with distinctly Jeffersonian arches and windows. Opposition to the Sugar Tax in 1764, the Stamp Act of 1765, and the Boston Tea Party were all organized under this one roof. Quite literally, the rebellion serving as the spark that grew into the Revolutionary

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War was inspired here. It seems eerily appropriate for me to stand in its shadow simultaneously looking forward and backward in the midst of my own revolutionary struggle for metaphysical identity.

Walking along the red line that marks the Freedom Trail's progression through the city, I purposefully notice the relationships of other people: couples kissing under a tree, holding hands on the same red line, bums hazily arguing in Boston Common, and even a protest against the war in Iraq. The ever-present conflict Sartre suggested is within us for either control of (power over) or incorporation of the Other into our own self is obvious to me here. I see these two strategies firsthand: the act of love – an attempt at possession, or bringing in something admired in another into my own being; and the act of hate – an attempt to ignore or flee something considered ugly in the Other and thus degrade it in order to better define ourselves as opposite, or better raise ourselves above the ugliness (Sartre in Raymond, 1991, p. 379). But each attempt is inherently narcissistic and impossibly futile. When love is considered as the act by which we try to incorporate something respected, appreciated, or desired from another into our own being, the Other's possession of this trait cannot be escaped. Since we cannot ever completely know another, as Descartes has suggested, we cannot ever grasp that in them which we may love. We are therefore rather embarrassingly trying to catch something that is perpetually fleeing our attempt. Similarly, when the Other is hated or persecuted (especially when we have historically gone well out of our way to denigrate or eliminate the Other), we are unconsciously proving how clearly the Other contaminates us and our definition of ourselves. Love and hate *are* thus brothers born of the same mother within our mind as we are, regardless of choice, "in a state of instability in relation to the Other" (Sartre, 1956, p. 529). They are equally impossible to

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comprehend when the attempt for each turns out to be a cruel game in which he I seek will flee, and possess me when I flee him (Sartre, 1956, p. 529).

This inability for us as people to ever fully understand the Other falls into the areas of what Sartre (1956) called the *en soi* (being-in-itself) and the *pour soi* (being-for-itself). Being-in-itself is the world of objects that is distinct from consciousness, or Being-for-itself. The *en soi* is very much the *Das man* of Heidegger, it is “they”, and according to Sartre, “dumb-packed-togetherness” (in Raymond, 1991, p. 247) that causes all of humanity to resemble a herd of sheep. Stuck in traffic on I-95, it is the frat party mentality that governs the masses. In contrast, like phenomenological hermeneutics in which we are all encouraged to embrace the way our “unanticipated, unmethodical being in the world can . . . make a claim to some sort of truth (Jardine in Kincheloe and Tobin, 2006, p.280), the *pour soi* is empty and with absolute freedom. It is more like “a hole in being than any sort of being at all” in that it is ready to be filled by phenomenological being (Raymond, 1991, p. 247). Yet this relationship is (like the love/hate reaction) similarly a paradox in that the hole that is the *pour soi* requires the *en soi* to be filled. The two are in fact, again, engaged in a struggle that is both mutually destructive and beneficial. “We are not our past,” as Sartre tells us, “for it has already occurred; yet we are not our future, for that has yet to occur.” And when we try to live in the present moment, “we find that it has already disappeared” (in Raymond, 1991, p. 247). We are thus not an object, yet we yearn to be filled up and complete in order to feel like one. Or, as Heidegger has similarly made claim, “Being and beings are borne or carried outside of one another yet at the same time borne toward one another” (in Crotty 1998, p. 99). Despite our best efforts at individuality, despite our best efforts at finding meaning, we cannot, it seems, happily exist without the presence of the Other.

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As I see it, there are (not to imply simplicity) two ways to understand this relationship. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), Merleau-Ponty has put it almost positively when he suggests that “Paul is Paul and I am myself” and although his consciousness and mine may work together to build our definitions of the world, “it is nevertheless from the subjectivity of each of us that each one projects this ‘one and only’ world” (p. 356). Any encounter with another will thus force us to experience something different than our own version of existence. In *No Exit* (1946), Sartre suggests a more “haunting” picture of the Other suggesting that, even when alone, we cannot escape his presence: When reading we are forced to understand words written by an Other; When walking we are in the eyes of the Other. The world, from this perspective, is defined by the Other and when this is true, we are “at the mercy of another meaning maker” (Raymond, 1991, p. 375). As a result, when we can neither escape the gaze of the Other, nor the pollution they can thus toss into our identity, hell in fact can be found in their presence (Sartre, 1946).

I have spent my whole life trying to abandon what Nietzsche called the herd (1927). My biggest fear, however, is embracing this herd and becoming false. Here I am, however, simultaneously believing myself to be true while still squeezing through a pre-drunk-happy-hour crowd in the middle of a trendy commons within one of America’s most popular cities. To make it worse, I have thoughts that are nothing more than regurgitations of the same thoughts written by many others. The definition of non-conformity has to come from conformity – one cannot exist without the other. As Sartre and Merleau-Ponty have suggested, this mutually creative relationship similarly encompasses love and hate, both of which cannot exist without a narcissistic desire. Love (that thing that makes me value the life of others) is not what I (or anyone else) want it to be; it is not self-less devotion to another. It is in fact, rather the opposite:

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it is total devotion to self improvement. This is important and problematic. If one is to believe this in regards to that most pure, most respected relationship to Others, the only means by which we can live in light of such a cruel game of narcissism (in which all players will lose) must be inherently solitary. Perhaps the life we should live is thus very close to that advice given by Sean Penn's character, Lt. Welsh, throughout Terrance Malick's 1998 film *The Thin Red Line*:

We're living in a world that's blown itself to hell as fast as everybody can arrange it . . . all a man can do is shut his eyes and let nothing touch him. Look out for himself... What difference you think you can make, one single man in all this madness? If you die, it's gonna be for nothing. There's not some other world out there where everything's gonna be okay. There's just this world. Just this rock . . . Only one thing a man can do. Find something that's his. Make an island for himself. (Malick, 1998)

I'd like to find that thing and move to this island. Yet, like that game when someone asks you to "Name three things you'd take with you..." I'm afraid the one thing I'd realistically want to bring would be a boat. Life can't be that pointless. It's suddenly obvious that I need to get out of the city.

You know you're in New Hampshire when you see "Moose Crossing" signs. "3,163 accidents this year," they read below a cartoon-esque picture of a smiling Bullwinkle. Since a moose stands roughly eight feet tall at times, with long, slim legs below an immense horned body, collisions with cars are particularly deadly. Cars that hit them travelling at even slow speeds knock the legs out from underneath the moose and send its' body directly onto the cab of the car. In such accidents when all passengers have been killed, the moose involved in the collision has been seen walking away only dazed. Such thoughts, even when I am only ten minutes into New England, somehow help me feel far removed. I lower all windows, and take a

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deep breath... I can breathe better here. There is no traffic on the road and I feel like I have left the dumb-packed-togetherness behind me. A short time later, hearing nothing but the warm crackle of burning pine and seeing nothing but darkness beyond the circular light of the flame, my mind again became silent. "Why am I a teacher?" I thought. There was no answer.

V

Had it not been for my father, I do not believe I would have finished high school. Regardless of grades, regardless of comments from my teachers, my father inspired within me a sense of making the most out of the opportunity I had been given. In a Foucaultian sense, he gave me the Power to succeed. Simply put, I want to do this for others. I have thus made it my life's work to try to break the power structures Foucault (1980) identified as being definitive of a subject's relationship to the world. Having a label pinned on my chest that may have well have read "ADHD child – Medicate or suspend me," I did not fit into the 1985 standards of a normal third grader. This language, "ADHD child" was successful to some in that they were able to put me in some category; to me it was hurtful in that no matter how normal I felt I could never be a normal third grader. This was my experience with identity as being anything but what people told me I was.

Like Marx who emphasized the social rather than the economic and post-structuralists (such as Foucault) concerned with "the analysis of how individuals are constituted as subjects" (Munro, 1998, p.28), I embraced a challenge to help others break free from their labels and reject the "grand narratives" that may have suppressed the definition of themselves into "universal or absolute truths" (Munro, 1998, p. 28). Such thought is therefore closely linked to phenomenological hermeneutics and existentialism in that reality is not to be found, but rather understood uniquely. It allows us to break away from everything the herd or the *Das man* tells

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us, and find that meaning for ourselves in our own definitions, our own Being-in-the-world. Ironically, as proven by my own experience, another's perception of us is not important - the perception of ourselves is far more powerful. In other words, "What is said to be the way things are," Crotty writes, "is really just the sense we make of them" (1998, p. 64). I became a teacher so I could help children make this kind of sense; I became a teacher to help children learn how to define themselves. To put it simply, I became a teacher because I was once a child.

Within this goal lurks a confrontation with hegemony (Apple, 2004) and the established positions Habermas (1972) has called mutilating and corrupt. "Full of omissions and distortions," traditional education is thereby meant to be confronted in an attempt to find the "paradox, contradiction, and irony" that inevitably rests in those textbooks embraced by tradition (Habermas in Chang, 2007, p. 134). In other words, those power relationships that are the result of experiences with labels, racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, and normative behavior (Kumashiro, 2003) have been historically linked to traditional education. A teacher, critical theorist, or any other embracing post-structuralism must therefore put himself squarely on the front line in the battle for equal rights. He must embrace that notion of "diffe'rance" that is suggestive of a radically diverse understanding of language (Garrison and Leach, 2001, p70); he must similarly believe, as did Derrida, that "there is no master word, no ultimate foundation of meaning that must end the series" (in Garrison and Leach, 2001, p.69); he must fight to reduce bigotry, hatred, and violence by increasing tolerance for sexual difference (Petrovic & Rosiek, 2007, p. 210); he must confront those values that have become institutions by becoming a wedge that may allow him to, like Whitlock confronted fundamental queerness, gently pry apart tradition (2007, p. 84); and, not finally, he must challenge "the very ways we think [that] are framed not only by what is said, but also by what is not said" (Kumashiro, 2000, p.42). A teacher with such inspiration

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understands what it means to care in terms of Noddings (2000) and similarly, that there is something within education that can be destroyed (Britzman in Pinar, 1998, p. 37). That something should be normative expectations and traditional hegemony, not the non-normal, unique, or utterly personal dreams of a child.

Teaching, I have noticed, is not something that can be understood pragmatically. Since a teacher will at any given moment be responsible for any number of young people, and since these young people will inevitably be different (not just from him, but also from each other), teaching as a profession must be understood qualitatively. As teachers, an understanding of society and its power of normativity is of great importance. With respect to post-structuralism, hermeneutics, and phenomenology, as inspired by individualism rooted in existentialist thought, teachers can thus break apart the world as it is currently structured and reveal how “everything is dangerous” (Foucault in Weems, 2007, p. 204). Yet we can not only be instrumental in tearing down/identifying these structures. In Michael Apple’s terms, we must be necessary tools in its restructuring (2004). In Pinar’s words (1975), we must become part of a reconceptualization of understanding (in Pinar, 2004). These are the challenges that make me proud to be a teacher.

It’s getting late. In relation to that question I asked myself not too long ago while warming beside an early summer campfire, I understand completely what Pirsig meant when he said “When you’ve got a Chautaugua in your head, it’s extremely hard not to inflict it on innocent people” (1974, p.167). Luckily there’s no one in sight. I am very glad that I have been able to answer the question so quickly. In light of the dark places I have been, it is certainly reassuring to be able to define something.

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It is my last night in the shadow of Acadia's Cadillac Mountain and I opt for a room in a historic hotel overlooking a descending field of wildflowers before falling off the rocky bluffs. Since the summer tourist season begins on July 4th, room rates are ridiculously reasonable in June. I shower for the first time in four days, shave what has become a two week beard, and actually put on the one clean shirt I had stashed away in my truck. I eat a dinner of grilled Halibut in an empty restaurant, smile at the waitress in an awkward attempt at flirting, pay my bill in cash, and walk out on the porch to finish a bottle of wine. Finding a rocking chair with a nice view, I sit down with half a glass of Cabernet and enjoy the sunset. I am not alone for more than fifteen minutes before that bottle was empty.

Almost on cue, Robert and Elly appear from out of their porch side room and sit in the love seat beside me. Enjoying the moment alone, I debate moving for two seconds; there is, however, something in their presence, there is something in their smile, and there is something in the way he holds her hand that ties me to my chair. Without an introduction the gentleman produces a bottle and offers to fill my glass. Leaning towards me, he does not wait for an answer, fills my glass, and introduces himself and his wife. This day is their anniversary and they have travelled up from Boston to celebrate. "Why not join us for a moment? You seem friendly," Elly says. We sit on that porch just talking and sharing stories, mostly about their time together and the things they have seen. An hour and a half later I excuse myself with a nice head rush and what I can only define as a full heart. Turning to say "Good night," Robert for some reason tosses me the cork to the bottle we had shared. I put it in my pocket, smile and go to sleep with serious doubts about nihilism, about Sartre's notion of "hell in the other," and with a new brooding, yet inspiring feeling that can only be loneliness.

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It is funny how we are never quite happy. Leaving Boston, I was thrilled at the idea of immersing myself in nature; of getting lost in the woods and finding a Thoreau like transcendental escape of society that would allow me to truly prove to myself how much I may “love not man less, but nature more” (Lord Byron). When truly alone, however, things are different. These past few days spent in Maine’s coastal forests have allowed me to be truly more alone than even I may have been prepared. Until tonight I have not had anyone to share the view with, no one with whom to share the sunrise on a crisp June morning, no one with whom to sit and share a field of deep purple loosestrife, no one to even call or quietly smile with and watch a moose walk by. It does seem, in light of this experience without an Other, that Chris McCandless (Krakauer, 1996) may have had the better position from which to relate: Happiness, he wrote in his final diary entry before dying alone in that bus in Alaska, is indeed “only real when shared” (from the movie *Into the Wild*, 2007).

This journey has to end, and I know the perfect place.

VIII

Maine’s Mount Katahdin is an allusive dream for many dreamers. Here the Appalachian Trail, which begins on Georgia’s Springer Mountain, ends its 2,175 mile journey through nearly every East Coast state. Hikers on the trail pass the heights of North Carolina’s Mount Mitchell – the highest peak east of the Mississippi; descend through New Hampshire’s Mahoosuc Notch – generally referred to as the hardest one mile on the trail with its caverns, knife edges, drop-offs, and climbs; pass the “Old Man in the Mountain” on New Hampshire’s state quarter; and traverse around Mount Washington with reportedly the “world’s worst weather” where, according to the National Weather Service, hurricane force winds blow 100 days of the year. By the time hikers who have endured such hardships reach Mount Katahdin they are understandably exhausted yet

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seasoned in pride. These are hikers who have endured hardships no others can understand - unless of course they have shared the experience. Although I am almost ashamed to admit it, I feel a connection to this place and these hikers. This place is where their journey ends; fitting that it should be a good enough place to end my own.

I am still thinking about Robert and Elly and my familiarity with Christopher McCandless' final lesson as I sign my name next to the ranger station's trail itinerary. Yesterday, before arriving at my lakeside campsite, I watched a National Guard Black Hawk helicopter air lift the body of a fallen hiker off the trail high above the tree line. According to the park ranger this morning, his friends ahead of him dislodged a boulder that, rolling down toward him, sent him off the knife's edge. Death comes quickly to everyone I suppose. Signing my itinerary is thus a particularly important part of climbing Mount Katahdin - it is required that the rangers know what time you left, where you are going, and what time you anticipate arriving back at camp. I sign my name, glance up the trail ahead, and begin what I'm hoping will be the last and most difficult part of this journey. The hike begins with a gentle slope that I have to assume will become treacherous.

It is hard to not be impressed with the beauty of life on a mountain. With the memory of Robert and Elly, and that newfound understanding of happiness as being far more enjoyable when it is shared, I once again think about teaching and those students with whom I share my experience. Social meliorism has been defined as that "belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event may be bettered" (Garrison & Leach in Richardson, 2001, p. 79). Like Hegel's dialectic, it encourages us to study the positivity that may exist in negativity and thus "put forth endeavor for improvement of conditions" (Garrison & Leach in Richardson, 2001, p. 79). Meliorism is thus not unlike

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Friere's notion of "conscientisation" as described in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). Here Friere, drawing from Marx and existential phenomenology, is suggestive of that "awakening of, or increase in, consciousness that allows humans to relate to the world" (Crotty, 1998, p.148) not unlike I have allowed Robert and Elly to affect my own life in a brief and chance encounter. For Friere, such conscientisation can be seen as a form of critical education that can allow us all to learn how we can "perceive social, political, and economic contradictions," (such as those responsible for hegemony and normative oppression) and thus "take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Friere in Kumashiro, 2000, p. 37).

As a teacher these thoughts inspire me: We can, it seems, make a difference. Perhaps such thoughts can offer some meaning to my life as affected by my professional choices. Perhaps they can become a grounding light within my own night.

Like Heidegger's phenomenological hermeneutics, Friere agrees that human beings must be considered "beings in the process of becoming" (Friere in Crotty, 1998, p.150). In light of conscientisation as that phenomenon that can allow us to not only relate to others in an attempt to bring about social change, but also to notice, to watch, and to learn from the performance of society in order to bring about such change, Friere's philosophy thus applies to my struggles with such clarity that I have never had the pleasure of allowing into my mind. The pursuit of such meaning within all humanity, he writes, "cannot be carried out in isolation or individualism," rather "it can only take place in fellowship and solidarity" that is found in relationships with others (in Crotty, 1998, p.153). In order to make a difference in the world, we must therefore put ourselves squarely within that world and embrace all we can learn from others – both positive and negative. Without dialogue resulting from such relationships there can simply be no conscientisation. It is simply as Crotty (1998) states "a joint project" that "takes place in human

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beings . . . united by their action and their reflection upon that action and upon the world” (p.153). This thought shines a light through the attic of my mind.

My pulse is quickening. I can see ahead what appears to be the peak. I begin to run thinking that this hike wasn't all I thought it would be. Coming into the clearing, I find a magnificent view of what the rangers refer to as a “false peak” – a small hump that, like a mirage, appears from down slope to be the greater peak attempted. The true Katahdin still sits far away on the horizon. The trail is getting more strenuous and I need some water.

In Friere I have finally begun to see the value that can be social meliorism. We are part of this world, and we have defined this world through our subjectivity, our perceptions, and our relationships with others. Only death can allow us to escape. Yet, since we created all we see, since we defined all we see, it will always be possible (until we take that step into the unknown) to change everything as we see it collectively. Hiding in the woods, running away from others, perhaps following Sartre into his version of hell is thus a road followed by the weak – those Marx referred to as “people content to interpret the world but with no interest in changing it” (in Crotty, 1998, p. 138). This is important. Only the strong can stand up to tradition, only the strong can break up with nihilism. Like sticks bundled together, it is however, too strong for one to do it alone. It is thus not at all shameful to believe that “No one can liberate someone else, no one can even liberate herself or himself. Instead, people together, people in fellowship, liberate one another (Friere in Crotty, 1998, p.162).

Reaching for a hand hold on a particularly dangerous climb high above the knife's edge trail, I barely grab on to what I had hoped would be a sturdy rock with weight deep below. Had I missed or misjudged this rock the weight of my backpack would have dropped me 100 feet into the gorge below. “Death *does* come quickly,” I thought. I catch my breath, give a glance below

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at what was almost both my future and my end, and continue climbing. The clouds are beside me and the lake where I camped the night before is small from such heights. I hope the peak I see in the distance will not let me down. Like my backpack, this chautaugua is getting heavy.

I suddenly feel like Sisyphus (Camus, 1955). Might I be climbing this mountain knowing that when I get to the top I will find another struggle? It is very likely I will, but here in this project I am happy. And that is the point. Literally speaking, in climbing this mountain put down before me I have a project; I have a purpose. My purpose, although temporary, is getting to the top. Metaphorically, in struggling to climb this mountain within my soul I am attempting to bring about definition. The attempt is inspiring. Camus (1955) has referred to this process of struggle only to inevitably struggle more as existential revolt. In a world that is haunted by absurdity, suffering, and death, and depressed with no afterlife and no God, it seems that our freedom of thought and our projects are all we truly have. These projects and this freedom can thus provide meaning for our existence.

Those that believe in this perspective understand the anger of the nihilist over the absurdity of life, and simultaneously adopt the courage of the theist refusing to give in to despair (Raymond, 1991). I can thus refuse this despair while I continue to believe in a world that can have no meaning. But, like Camus, I too “know that something in it has meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one” (1961, p. 14). Sisyphus’ punishment was to slave day in and day out to push a rock up a mountain only to watch it roll back down again. His revolt against the Gods was to enjoy the act and do it again. In *the Plague*, Camus’ Dr. Rieux (1954) continued to struggle through the plague *regardless* of his inability to save. We can find inspiration here if we, like Sisyphus, choose our revolt and continue living or, like Dr. Rieux, choose our projects and continue working. Teaching, therefore, can be my choice; the

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attempt can be my revolt. It is thus possible that our life is truly what we make of it: Our projects, especially when they include an underdog struggle against death, can determine our value. We *can*, I found somewhere way above tree-line, meet death squarely in an assertion of the life we have just lived.

You can never know that you have actually reached a peak (officially) until you stand on that plate bolted into the mountain by the United States Geological Survey. On Mount Katahdin, this plate sits next to a large pyramid of rocks called a cairn. I arrange my tripod, set the timer, and snap a picture of myself standing with my foot planted like Sir Edmund Hillary on this plate. My red wind-breaker stands out against the cloud I am standing within, my blue baseball cap hides my nappy hair, my torn shorts, my scratched and muddy legs, and my leathered, beaten, yet proudly muddy boots tell the story. I am clutching a small, flat rock in my left hand. This is where the Appalachian Trail ends; this is where my journey will end.

IX

I sometimes wonder how far you have to travel before you catch up with yourself. Looking at this picture displayed on my bookshelf, I pay special attention to the quirky smile on my lips. It was on that trip culminating on that mountain that I realized what is important in life. It is not all this. It is not an abbreviation after my name – it is not a degree hung on a wall. It is not that proliferation of theory that can, if not controlled, build up inside our brains until we nearly go crazy. It is not our careers. Just below this picture there is a small collection of artifacts I am often asked about. Gathered during a two week drive up the East Coast, they represent places I have been: There is a small pebble with “Maine” written on it in someone else’s handwriting; there is a bottle of sand I alone know is from Atlantic City; there is beer mug; a wrinkled map of Boston’s Freedom Trail; a small recreation of Maine’s most famous

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lighthouse; a wine cork; and a second rock with the words "The Mountain" written on its underside. People ask "What mountain?" I change the subject and ask them a distracting question. I know what mountain; I know what was found there.

I am not going to make any grand statements here that will echo through the halls of libraries for a minute, much less for centuries. Others have provided all the thought that is necessary by which to make these kinds of proclamations. What I am going to do is end this story with a simple statement: What is most important in this life is not anything other than the freedom that is our mind. Perhaps this is simplistic; perhaps this is too pretty, but it is a lesson I have learned by digging around in the dirty, dark attic between my ears. This is the lesson I have learned through an uncanny confrontation with the uncomfortable. We are absolutely free to determine that which is important to us. We are surely free to define our existence. I'm not sure who is right: Camus, Sartre, Nietzsche, Friere, Hegel, Heidegger? All I know is that the definition of right is completely subjective and that their opinions can help us get there. There can thus be no answer to the question. There can be no end to the journey that is this Life of Theory. Such a neat box is an illusion.

I am home now. My girlfriend, Sarah, has saved my life from my own Tolstoy-esque (1884) confession. We met not long after I came down off that mountain - almost a year ago to the day. She will be moving in with me in one month. I wish she had been on that porch to meet Bob and Elly; I wish she had been with me on that lake when Mr. Katahdin dominated the northern horizon; I wish she could have smelled the moose passing 10 feet away; I wish I could accurately explain to her the ways in which all those things reminded me of who I am – and who I hope to become. I do not know much about any of the places I have been except to say that none of them were completely real because I will never be able to look at anyone and say,

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“Remember?” Regardless of how happy I may have been, I was alone. Happiness, I believe today, truly is only real when shared. I don't know much more about it. What I do know is that when I am with Sarah, my pain stops. When I lay next to her there is no grapple, there is no struggle, there is no build up of a pounding pressure in my mind that keeps me awake, there is no debate for which identity to choose. When I am with her that dark attic of my brain is illuminated by a cloudless blue sky; I know who I am. All the questions I have asked do essentially boil down to one: Is there anything that can possibly be any more important?

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty may have been right, love may be selfish; indeed the majority of what we do in life may be a result of a narcissistic attempt at self-improvement. But - and this is my great *But* - I know that when Sarah smiles, I smile. Love may truly be selfish, but when it selfishly makes you feel good to make an Other feel good (as a teacher, a family member, a life-partner, a husband, a wife, friend, girlfriend, boyfriend, or another person), your innate selfishness can absolutely make other people happy. And this is important. Here I have found something to carry that won't fit in a backpack. Here I have found the brightest light that does shine straight through hell.

“Eventually all things will merge into one,” and, as Norman Maclean (1976) wrote, “A river runs through it.” Like this river, my theory proliferation will continue to flow as long as I live. Sarah and all others I love are undoubtedly an Other: I know that since I can never fully enter into her (or anyone else's) mind I will not ever be able to truly know her as a result. I will not attempt an argument with what I myself believe. Regardless of my agreement with existentialist thought and that notion that “It is those we live with and love and should know who elude us” (Maclean, 1976, p. 104), I too will be haunted by an attempt that will bring me the same kind of happiness Camus supposes Sisyphus found. I know I can take all I have learned

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and try, as did a young Maclean in his attempt to understand the life of his brother, to live and be content to acknowledge an honest effort to “love completely without complete understanding” (p. 103). In such an ongoing attempt, I know I will have become what de Beauvoir (1948) called “a man who has known real loves, real revolts, real desires, and real will” and thus know that I have “no need of any outside guarantee to be sure of [my] goals” (in Raymond, 1991, p. 504). Their meaning, and thus my own, comes from my own drive to accomplish them. I am a teacher. More importantly, based on where I have been and what I may have to offer, today I know that I am a teacher someone will be proud to call their own. This summer will end – I know it will be September soon.

I have been alone for too long. Perhaps it is not time to go home; perhaps it is now time to make one.

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