

## *Work in Progress*

UUCGV Sermon by  
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"Please tell us a scary story, Mr. Hyland!" they say, clustering around me eagerly, their eyes shining, their imaginations primed; all 20 of them in their 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom at Dos Rios Elementary where I tell them stories every month. And before I do, I adjust my hat, lean down and tell them that stories are part of what makes us human: scary stories, sad stories, stories of courage, stories of growing up. They are a big part of how we learn. How to know right from wrong. How to be brave. How to love and be loved. How to be compassionate, to yourself and to each other and the earth.

But as I said this, I thought back, as an old man can, on how often I had said these things to my own children, but not told them about the real monsters, the real fears, the real challenges they would face. As I had faced, and my father before me, and our families had faced. War, illness, job loss, unemployment, debt, economic uncertainty, all in increasingly unstable times in an unstable world powered by an increasingly unstable capitalist system. For me and for them, their beautiful faces beaming up at me, we were all heroes on a hero's journey, mine ending; theirs just beginning.

And so, looking through my storyteller's hat this morning, I want to tell you a story about part of that journey, my journey, in the hope that it might resonate with your own. In some ways it is the story I wished I had told to my own children, and perhaps may motivate you to tell **your** own children, young or old. It is a story of possibility in seemingly impossible circumstances, a story of resilience that I did not know I had, that I believe speaks to all of us in these scary times of accelerating change and systemic instability. The story is about work and career and what may be happening to both as we hurtle forward ever faster into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Work in progress, as it were. As I am. And as you are as well.

There are 4 parts to the story followed by some reflections: the dream, the death, the resurrection and the reinvention. So hang on, here we go.

### **The Dream**

It was a few days before Christmas, 1983, and I had just found a job shelving books and ringing up purchases in a small bookstore in Houston, Texas. I looked up and cringed, ducking behind the shelf of Harlequin romance novels. Had she seen me? "If not," I said to myself, "she and

her mother soon would.” **She** was a former student of mine at Rice University, an engineering major who became fascinated and frustrated with my courses on Latin American history; frustrated because the history was inconsistent and incomplete, containing none of the precision of her engineering courses.

She and dozens like her had flocked to my new courses, created as a framework for an entirely new field of history at Rice, embracing the collision through conquest of Native American, European and African peoples and cultures and the rise of Latin American civilization. Perhaps because of the themes themselves, or my own rather bizarre approach to history, I ended up trying to lead my largely white, mono-ethnic, middle class students of scant history, into a largely multi-colored, multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, poor, maddeningly diverse part of the world with a deep, largely unwritten history.

This went far beyond dates, dynasties, and the traditional palace balcony view of the past. It went as deeply as possible into the social and economic realities of the people themselves as they forged, wittingly or no, a far-flung civilization before European colonization, during European colonization and their post-colonial lives within the expanding orbit of the Industrial Revolution. It was a personal crusade to cross oceans, explore worlds, bring the past alive and evangelize its significance in the minds of my post-modern, technology-driven, career-focused students. I sought to give voice to the historically voiceless and thereby fascinate, no inflame, them with curiosity. Perhaps, **conquer** them? Hmmm, Hernán Cortés *Hyland*, but far kinder, gentler? Who knows?

“Peripheral history,” sniffed my colleagues in US history, intent on building a doctoral program in US Southern history. “A mish-mash of anthropology, geography and myth,” muttered a few. “But not history. Maybe he should be in the Anthropology Department.” “A fad that won’t last,” said others. “He’s only here on a teaching fellowship.” But it did last, and began to attract **their** history majors, graduate and undergraduate. Bowing to enrollment pressure, the one-year teaching fellowship turned into a tenure-track professorship, and the grumbling increased as I bucked protocol and pressed for a world history approach that began to seriously threaten efforts to convert Rice into a center for US Southern history.

But I was oblivious and enthralled with my work and my students. After 7 hard years of graduate school at UC Berkeley, I had never felt so free and so fulfilled; so creative and so passionate. This was far more than the job I sought. This was a calling that sought me. And I responded heart and soul to it.

But I had not paid attention. I had not played the game. I delayed publication until too late and not even a book and a prize-winning article were enough. The game was over. The career

ended. And so, 3 years after arriving, I was leaving, my contract ending. Someone else would fill the new tenure-track position my work had created.

## **The Death**

The shock was profound; disbelief crumbling into despair as I tried in vain to break the fall, shore up the wall that was cracking all around me. Privately. For publicly I had still to be the professor, the mentor, the advisor to my students who, as they learned of the decision, did not understand and demanded an explanation that I could not give. And for 4 more months I had still to be the colleague to my fellow professors who now averted their eyes, avoided conversation, and acted as strangers might in the hallways. The silence was deafening.

The excommunication, for that was what it was, was inexorable and complete. I was no longer one of them. I had somehow failed and been cast out as unworthy. As the term ended, none of them thanked me for the work performed, nor wished me well as I packed up my books. As I learned later, it was much like the layoff or downsizing at countless corporations.

You may know the drill. The sudden unannounced visit, desk cleanout, cancellation of access privileges, erasure of identity, walk through the workplace escorted by a uniformed guard, past work colleagues, and out the door, for the last time. A depressingly routine “reward” for many if not most, after years of loyal service, exceptional performance reviews, certificates of recognition, trust in a management that proved to be untrustworthy, and that had just outsourced your job overseas to reduce cost. At least I had opened the door myself. I turned out the light and left the job, no, the dream, behind.

But not really, as I eventually learned. Callings don’t die so easily. The death of a dream doesn’t happen so quickly. Jobs may come and go. But the death of a dream is too deeply rooted for that. It’s not about money, or power or status which strangely don’t seem to matter. It’s more about creativity, service and connection to others. At least, looking back, it seemed so to me.

Death of this kind is disconnection, dismemberment, extinguishment of the inner fire that once burned so brightly, now turned to ashes. It’s a slow, painful process beset with guilt, shame, anger and despair that inevitably is shared, one way or another, with those closest to you. Once lived, the dream lives on in memory, its death a trauma, defying forgetting. It took me years to bury the professor. And even now, in the twilight of life, I feel him still.

But I did not know any of this then. There were more immediate consequences to face. This was, after all, a loss of income, pitifully small though it was. And though my wife, Jan, had a job, also at Rice, its modest income was not enough to support us and our 3 young children. I had

to find work quickly. There was no time to spare. But what and where? And all the while, the economy was darkening as oil prices plunged, oil industry-related companies closed and the Great Recession of 1982 took hold, first in oil dependent Houston, and then the country.

## **The Resurrection**

As it turned out, the economy did “bust” after the prolonged “boom” of the OPEC-driven run-up of oil prices in the late 1970s, and I found myself jumping from one failing small business to another –3 in all—before ending up behind that shelf of books in the bookstore just before Christmas. That was a low point, to be sure, but I had survived; we as a family had survived. Barely. And though I did not know it at the time, in a few weeks, I would find my way into not just another job, but a totally new career. So perhaps driven by a flicker of hope, I swallowed my pride and my shame and stood up to greet my former student and her mom.

But only part of me stood up that afternoon. The other part was still devastated and grieving. And what made it difficult was the fact that she was part of what I had lost. Nevertheless, she was there and we talked briefly and parted amicably and I found that once again I had survived. But something else had been happening to me during the year and a half of resumé writing, job searching and jumping from one small company to another as they sank. I was learning.

I was learning firsthand about the marketplace, workplace, working in companies, working with technology, working for management, working with colleagues, working with customers and suppliers local and international, all within a massive, global system of production and consumption of unbelievable complexity that was both expanding and changing, indeed accelerating, rapidly.

Later, I would learn up close about the capital flows that lubricated the gears and pulleys of this “Machine”, as Thomas Friedman called it in his recent book, ***Thank You for Being Late: An Optimist’s Guide to Thriving in the Age of Accelerations* (2016)**. These were flows of investment, operation, and expense; stocks and bonds; buying and selling; borrowing and lending; wages and benefits from industry to industry, region to region, connecting all of us together economically, if not benevolently.

Ultimately, I was learning that, much to my surprise, I could still learn. That life after death in this capitalist world was possible. That I could still create, could still serve, could still connect in that world, even though before it had seemed so alien to me.

But how?

## The Reinvention

The letter arrived a few weeks after my encounter at the book store. It was unexpected. It was from the President of Rice University and contained an introduction to a former graduate student of his in the Chemistry Department of the University of Texas in Austin who had formed a small industrial consulting company in Houston a few years back. Howard turned out to be not an academic, but a brilliant renegade and entrepreneur, curmudgeon and crusader, taskmaster and teacher, at whose side I learned and became an industrial engineer and international consultant in industrial maintenance and supply, project by project.

Starting immediately. Rising from the ashes of what had once been a thriving consulting practice fueled by the oil boom. Now with the Recession, it was just Howard, a loyal colleague, two office clerks...and me. So why gamble on me? one might ask. Well, here's where the 18 months of learning came in. I had learned that these small companies all needed a set of skills that turned out to be hard to find. Here's a list:

- Ability to gather data on-site, finding significant information through interviews
- Ability to do research, finding significant information among the data
- Ability to analyze research results, extracting significant findings out of the information
- Ability to *write* proposals and reports clearly and persuasively
- Ability to *present* proposals and reports clearly and persuasively
- Ability to manage projects, lead others and work in teams

And how had I come up with these skills? Well, it turns out that most of them are also the skills of a good historian...and history professor. To be sure, the content was different –and this required intense learning and guidance from Howard—but the skills were similar. Similar enough, at least, to navigate on this new ocean, far from the land I had known so well. So, the process of navigation itself did not scare me.

But the ocean did. Its vastness, depth and currents terrified me. I was neither an engineer, accountant or business manager and I didn't speak finance. And this was only the top, middle class, layer of content domains. The bottom, working class, layer, where ultimately I would spend most of my time, was made up of mechanics, electricians and instrument technicians whose world was one of machines and parts, systems and controls, reliability and failure rates.

It would take much time and effort to find my way through these content domains, let alone master them. And there was precious little time. My inclination was to tiptoe, but Howard demanded that I plunge. Luckily, or as divine fate decreed, I discovered that these content

domains, though highly technical and financial, were also deeply cultural and historical, a discovery that amazed me, fascinated me and ultimately empowered me.

What was totally different in all this was what was happening to the mental and perhaps spiritual parts of me. Spurred and excited by the possibilities before me, I had to reach deep down inside and **imagine** myself as something more than a failed history professor. I had to **imagine** myself as a skilled industrial consultant and project manager fully capable of doing an excellent job. The leap was enormous and the risks were high. But so was my motivation. I had failed myself and my family once; I would not do it again. So I pushed the margins of self-confidence, found the courage to confront my fears, and discovered capabilities that I never knew I had. Little did I know then that these were to be the first tools on my toolbelt of reinvention.

And so, working closely, Howard and I shifted focus and began bidding on US Defense Department requests for proposals (RFPs) and managed to win one involving a productivity analysis of the US Army Wholesale Supply system comprised of 25 depots throughout the country. I still remember the fear of failing as I stepped into this fast-moving unknown, this process of reinvention. One moment, Howard and I were sitting in the Unemployment Office finalizing hiring data; a week later, I was standing in front of a 3-star General in the Pentagon describing, as the Project Manager, how we were going to carry out the analysis.

That project won official DOD recognition and was followed by numerous others and then by an offer from another, larger consulting company to head up their maintenance and supply management practice. That in turn led me to set up my own international consulting company 20 years ago with two partners that continues in operation today. And In all of these projects, but especially those in Latin America, I encountered the ghost of the professor. I found myself teaching and doing history in a totally different way, thereby humanizing and connecting highly technical worlds in new, creative ways. And in so doing, serving others, by giving a voice to the historically voiceless workers who operate and maintain the “Machine”.

I had originally wanted to include insights --through the project work I have done-- into the accelerating impact of change on workers and workplaces, jobs and careers, all over the world over the last 35 years. But that must remain for another time.

Instead, I have tried to tell a story of a dream and its death, and the resurrection of the dreamer through imagination and reinvention. Like the stories I tell my 5<sup>th</sup> graders, the intent is not to focus on me, but to inspire you with the assurance that **you** can do it. You can find ways to create, serve and connect with others through work in this complicated, fast-moving global “Machine”. You **can** adapt and reinvent, holding onto your values, and, in so doing, learn more about yourself and this fascinating, scary, beautiful world than you ever dreamed possible.