

Leaving the Nest

My college career was one, big knock-on. After high school, Michael and I had gone to different schools. He had been offered a wrestling scholarship at the School of Mines in Colorado. He jumped on that. I hadn't been good enough to get a scholarship and was still unsure what I wanted to study. Or, even if studying was the right thing to do at this ripe age. Math was easy for me, but I wasn't really inclined that way. Then, although I had a penchant for reading and literature, I couldn't see myself majoring in English and being a teacher. My parents weren't really much guidance in this respect. We were in an age where you got out of high school, went to college and then got a job. There wasn't a lot of stress over going to the right university. Your whole life didn't depend on making, with all the experience of seventeen or eighteen years, the right choice. You would be okay. Just do it. So, mom and dad left it up to me.

My grandfather had been an architect and I had a bit of an artistic bent. I finally decided I was going to follow his lead and enroll in the architecture program at the University of New Mexico. It seemed like a good combination of my technical and artistic tendencies. I applied to UNM and planned to stay in town.

When August came around, Michael and I said our goodbyes, "See ya, man." And, "Later, bud." That was about it – the manly man parting. Then, we went off in the pursuit of higher education. Michael T did well in Colorado. He went into an engineering program. The wrestling fell off after a couple of years. A dose of reality had smacked him when his parents' health started to fail during his sophomore year. He decided he needed to get serious about his future and put his mind to the books.

I, on the other hand, was adrift. I attended classes but lacked focus, or, at least, had the wrong focus. I was staying in the dorms my freshmen year. Since my dorm room was right by the elevators, everyone on the floor passed by me on their way out, and I was frequently distracted. It was easier to go out than it was to study, not to mention more fun. I was tempted by whatever crowd was going by my door on any given night.

Let's just say that this isn't a good way to get through *any* college program.

In architecture it is particularly hard, because the professors expect students to work and rework their projects, around the clock. It's some kind of rite of passage, I'm sure. Because they did it, they think it's good for the current budding architects, too. And, a project is never done, either. There's no right answer in architecture. Just keep working. All-nighters are the expected mode of operation and it only gets worse after the freshmen year. It didn't take long before I was disillusioned with my course of study. The party crowds passing my dorm room looked more and more inviting every time. By the end of the year I was on academic probation.

At the end of the spring semester, I moved back to my parents' house for the summer break. I needed work. Michael and I had worked summers in high school doing sheetrocking, but he was staying in Colorado for summer school. So I didn't have a partner and it takes two in that trade. I wasn't real motivated anyway. I just needed something. I ended up finding a job with one of the contractors that used to come into Mr. Kelly's lumberyard. The job was doing clean-up and grunt work around at the various work sites. Didn't pay much, but it was a job, and it kept mom and dad off my back.

By August, I was still drifting, mentally at least. I knew I didn't want to go back to school. It was a waste of my time, and my parents' money. I told them I wasn't going back and we had a big row.

They said, "You'll just end up a janitor!"

I said, "Stop trying to control my life!"

They said, "You don't appreciate what we've done for you!"

Et cetera.

The gist of it was that I moved out and got my own apartment. A little freedom was what I needed. Well, that's what I thought, anyway. It wasn't long before I realized this was going nowhere. I'm not dumb, just hardheaded, which might actually be the same thing. I kept at it because I knew that going back into architecture wasn't the answer, either.

My friends from UNM drifted away. At first they liked having a place to go off-campus for a visit, something outside of the university. Gradually they lost interest. Our schedules were different, and so were our priorities. They had to worry about classes and tests. I had to worry about getting enough sleep so I could work the next day and pay rent at the end of the month.

Come spring I was getting lonely and started reading more. I went back and

reread a lot of the work that I'd only skimmed over in my freshmen English classes: *Moby Dick*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Hawthorne, Joyce Cary. It was Cary that led me back to Blake and poetry. I looked over Coleridge and somehow, don't ask me the connection, got immersed in Cummings.

dive for dreams
or a slogan may topple you
(trees are their roots
and wind is wind)¹

That was the one that caught me. I needed something solid, roots. I found that I was definitely diving to find a base. I related to the metaphor. And it was a key that opened up the rest of Cummings to me. What had seemed silly word games and fractured syntax started to have meaning. Slow down and work it out. Don't let the verse run over you like water. Take it in and think about it. Understand it.

The problem was that, at the time, I didn't know what my dreams were. That made for an extended immersion while I searched through all the topics that came up. It was self-directed study and by one without much academic experience or bent. It made for an eclectic mix, to be sure, but one that was of interest to me: not directives being handed down from the powers that be; not following by rote the well-traveled path.

After a while, I began to see this as a way out. Even though I had rejected the idea earlier, I could go back to school and study English literature. I wasn't really focusing on a career at this point, just a way out of my current morass. Studying something I was interested in and getting a degree seemed like a good start.

I'd spent a year fumbling and it was already too late to register for the fall semester. I set my sights on returning to school the next spring, fresh with the new year. I started looking for a new job, one that would let me work, pay the bills and still leave time for study. I ended up working as a waiter, the vocation of every student who needs to augment his financial situation.

I told my parents I was going back, but was too proud to ask for help. The

¹ Cummings, ee, 95 Poems, 1958, "60" ("dive for dreams").

coop was already flown. I was going to do this on my own. It would be more meaningful to me that way. They ended up helping anyway. I, at least in my mind, retained my dignity.

That spring I could only take a couple of classes. After that it was full on school and work. It took me three more years to get a bachelor's in English literature.

My hiatus had extended my college career by two years. Degree in hand, I was now looking for work. I'd already done one of the two things I had never wanted to do in life: wait tables. It's funny how priorities change when you're up against it. The other vocation at the bottom of my list was teaching. An English degree wasn't good for much else, so I started looking around at other opportunities.

It seems that sales is the area where the job listings say "bachelor's degree" or "some college" required. I ended up landing a sales job with a national company based in Houston. They were sending me to Houston for training.

This was propitious for me. Michael T was already living there. He'd been in Houston for two years. He had landed a job at a Houston oil company after graduating with an engineering degree. (Wow! It's amazing what a little focus and direction can do for a person. He had struggled with schoolwork in high school, preferring to spend his time with sports and schmoozing. When he put his mind to it, he breezed through the engineering program like nothing.) I was looking forward to joining up with my old buddy.