

THE SNOOPY GANG GOT IT RIGHT

Professor Bill Woerhlin

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In this brief talk, I must explain my enigmatic title and I want to engage in some shameless flattery of my audience, for reasons that will become clear as we go on.

It is a well-known and widely-celebrated fact that CVEC has offered courses to suit the tastes and challenge the intellects of almost every serious person:

- * science courses have ranged from the smallest cell to the cosmos
- * literature courses have ranged from Mark Twain to James Joyce
- * historical interest has been touched by courses on the archaeology of the Bible and study of the background of the modern Middle East
- * courses have treated the supreme themes of art and song...and the list could go on

But one thing we have surely NOT had in our organization is anything like a "True Confessions of the Instructor" course, and no doubt that is fortunate. However, in wild moments of fantasy, I have long toyed with the idea of submitting to the Curriculum Committee a proposal for a course with a title like "I Was A Teenage Hit Man," just to see what would happen. Would they approve? would it sell?

I am going to ask your indulgence in trying something that will sound like a confession to make a few important points and because Teresa, in her kind invitation for me to speak, made it quite clear "no remarks, no recognition." So, let me try.

To make this confession, I must take you back to my early retirement years, after a long and very happy career teaching history at Carleton College. I had enjoyed every aspect of my work there, but at age 65 I had reached a point where I could not stand to look at another student bluebook and I yearned for the freedom to choose my own reading, rather than dutifully fulfill my professional responsibilities. So retire I did, and for the better part of a year reveled in the freedom to read wherever my fancy took me. But then something happened. When I looked back over what I had been doing-a little of this and a little of that-I sensed both the lack of focus and the lack of achievement. Nothing had been examined in enough depth to make me feel I had grown in any way. There were no new insights or directions to my thinking. I had the feeling of marking time.

Another discomfort added to my gray mood. For as long as I was employed in education, I had the feeling of doing something useful, of making some kind of worthwhile contribution. Without my job, I missed that comforting certainty. Was retirement to be simply years of self-indulgence?

About this time, quite by chance, I came upon a book of cartoons by Charles M. Schulz, the creator of the Peanuts comic strip, with those delightful characters I have called the Snoopy gang. The book's title, *When You're Over The Hill, You Start To Gather Steam*, suggested its theme of the problems of aging. The first cartoon I looked at had two of the characters (I can't remember which ones) in conversation. The first one boasts "My grandfather knows 155 hymns" "Oh," replies the second "does he sing in the choir?" "No" says the first "he can't remember where the Church is."

I had always appreciated Schulz's work. With gentle humor, he seemed to make profound comments on the human condition: how we often wound each other; how we live with fantasies and false expectations (think of Lucy always pulling away the football just before Charlie Brown tries to kick it, and he seems to never learn); but Schulz also affirmed the human decency that meets apparent disasters with no more than an occasional "good grief."

I raced through the other cartoons and felt that this collection of jokes about seniors was right on the mark. They helped me define my situation and accept with good humor those things I could not change. Indeed, I was so excited by the book I wanted to lend it out and spread the word to others. As luck would have it, I lent it to a friend who (being a senior) forgot to return it, while I (being a senior) forgot to whom I lent it.

So, the Snoopy gang had helped me recognize the problems of my early years of my retirement: the fading of a sense of purpose in my life; the reality of my changing ability level, alas with some undeniable loss of power; and the absence of focus and feeling of achievement in my intellectual world. These were the problems, but where could I find the solution? The solution, in part, was provided by the founders of CVEC (Ron and Bettye Ronning, Keith and Bev Anderson) whom I sometimes think of as galloping down St. Olaf Avenue to bring salvation to the East side of town and more personally to me. Obviously CVEC has not encompassed all aspects of my life, but it has been a very important part of it, in three ways: in the courses I have taught; in the courses I have taken; and in the classmates and friends I have met.

COURSES I HAVE TAUGHT: Initially it was important to rethink and rework material from courses I had taught at Carleton, material which might otherwise simply have faded from my memory. After several years of doing that, I hit upon the plan of designing new courses in areas where I was not fully prepared, but did want to learn more. With a full year to prepare a course, more time than I ever had when teaching at the college, I found no difficulty giving focus to my reading and in fact read with a greater sense of achievement.

Moreover, in all these classes I have had the delight of meeting mature students whose only reason for being in class was their own intellectual curiosity, and who brought to discussions not only decades of reading, but invaluable life experience. After a career of trying to make younger students aware of some of the tragedies of human history, like the Holocaust, when their own lives had known no more serious crisis than finding the right date for the senior prom, mature students were a very welcome relief.

COURSES I HAVE TAKEN: These have served me in several ways. Some helped me to go where I had never been before. Ruth Hansen's course on the archaeology of the Bible opened up an entirely new form of inquiry to me, one that, as a historian, I should have known more about. So too, Stan Frear awakened my interest and appreciation of Irish literature.

Two courses on mathematics helped me make amends for past sins. Having attended high school and college with the old math, I had managed to get my A in calculus without the foggiest idea of what it was all about. I put new numbers into other people's formulas, and very little else. In the courses of Sy Schuster and Paul Fjelstad, I learned something about the mathematics of symmetry and came to see mathematics more broadly as a variety of systems of symbolic logic.

One course helped me develop a new sensibility, that of hearing and responding emotionally to German Lieder, a sensibility that has given me great pleasure. It was achieved simply by watching Dick Cantwell's own reaction to the songs as they were being played. In the very best sense of the word his reactions were infectious, and I profited by them.

Another course gave me the opportunity to reach beyond my reach. There are no entry requirements in CVEC courses, and this allowed me to enter a course offered by Ron Ronning and Bill Child on score reading for a Mahler symphony. Failures of the American educational system and my own early choices in life made my entry into the class a little like an elephant signing up for tap dancing lessons. One simple musical line I might have managed, but an orchestral score? I was overwhelmed and survived only by keeping one eye on the person in the class who seemed the most able. When she turned the

page, I turned the page. All was not lost, of course, a sheet of music is not quite the total mystery it once was, but proficiency is still a work in progress.

The value of concentrated study was brought home to me in Ross Shoger's course on stem cell research. I had read newspaper accounts, but nothing in enough depth to give me the basis for an opinion on the possibilities and dangers of what was going on in this part of the scientific world. Now I have a basis of knowledge which draws me to any new reports of activity in the field, and I can read them with reasonable understanding.

CLASSMATES (AND FRIENDS) I HAVE MET: In classes I have given and in others I have taken, discussions have given me access to insights and interpretations that would never have occurred to me if I had approached the novel, the play, the poem or piece of music on my own. My understanding has thereby been enhanced and made richer, and I must admit I have also experienced some envy and a certain sense of shame. This reminds me of Thomas Huxley's comment when he first read Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, "How stupid not to have thought of that." Once my ego has recovered from the bruise, however, I find I have a spur to try to be more attentive and thoughtful the next time. For a senior at risk of seeing powers weakening, this spur is not at all bad.

I said at the outset that I would engage in some shameless flattery in this talk and I hope my reasons are now clear. When I retired a dozen years ago, I found that there were indeed problems and losses that came with retirement and aging. A chance encounter with a book of cartoons featuring the Snoopy gang helped me to understand this, and to accept with good humor what I could not change. But it was CVEC that gave me the opportunity to teach, to learn, and to interact with alert and interesting people-that is with all of you-my teachers, my challenging students, and from classmates and friends from whom I have learned much.

A man can't ask for much more than that. Thank you.

Bill Woehrlin, CVEC annual meeting, May 16, 2006