A Working Retiree’s Response

When I took emeritus status at James Madison College in 2004, I also became a “working retiree.” Dean Sherm Garnett called it “soft” retirement. I continued to teach one-half time, eliminated most committee meetings, but kept involved in ac- tivities such as monthly MADhouses and public marathon readings of novels. This year, I am teaching only one course in the fall.

I have never regretted being a working retiree. There are four reasons why.

My wife, Barbara, and I have been able to spend more time with our sons, our daughter, their spouses, and our grandchildren. We were able to drive quite quick- ly to Bloomington and Iowa City after all five grandchildren were born. More impor- tant, we were able to stay for extended periods: when our daughter’s premature twins remained in the neo-natal intensive care unit, when the mother of Heather-- our daughter-in-law, died on the same day that Heather brought her first-born home, and when Heather’s second child was diagnosed with acute leukemia. And I was able to make several trips to California to help my youngest sister fight pancre- atic cancer for nearly three years; I was with her to the very end.

As a working retiree, I was able to travel during months that had formerly been devoted to teaching. Twice I returned to Bogota, Colombia, with Witness for Peace delegations. A group of us from our church went on a work mission to Los Fresnos, Texas, and Matamoros, Mexico, in connection with John Shinsky’s orphan- age. I also benefited greatly from two 10-day trips: one to Nicaragua and another to Israel. Here in the U. S. I attended a Marcus, Iowa high school class reunion in Tempe, Arizona, in March, and my 50th-year class reunion at Grinnell College was marked by joy, humor, and rekindling of friendships.

In “soft” retirement, I have been able to do more writing and scholarship than when I was teaching full-time. Much of that work has been writing on my terms. It has included a chapbook of poetry, a collection of occasional speeches and eulogies called SERMONS AND KIN, an anthology of 151 reviews of books, drama, and public speeches, and a book containing 68 letters that I wrote to my family during my 14 months of teaching in Bogota in 1962-1963. Some of the writing has been novel and daring, e. g., essays in the Michigan STATE NEWS and Lansing STATE JOURNAL deploring the ways in which sports have trumped academics during the Izzo and Dantonio eras. Students’ and faculty’s reactions have been revealing. I have also enjoyed it immensely when one of my letters to the editor was published in the New York TIMES. I also wrote a letter to Condoleezza Rice after her convoca- tion speech at M. S. U. But I did not appreciate it when my name appeared under a letter to the STATE NEWS that I did not write.

The most important advantage of being a working retiree is that I have continued to teach. I have always loved to teach. The “liberal and practical educa-

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tion“ of students, mandated in the Morrill Act of July 2, 1862, has been my mission. Teaching freshman writing and humanities for 40 years at Madison College has been challenging, frustrating, and rewarding. Let me close with three experiences that would not have occurred if I had retired fully in 2004.

At the end of fall, 2013, one of my first-year students wrote the following. “I owe MC 111 my highest praise and thanks because if it was not for this class, I don’t believe I would have gotten the promotion I did at my job on campus.” In compos- ing written answers to several questions before her oral interview, this student remembered the specific class sessions on thesis, telling facts, and unity, coherence, and emphasis. “While writing down my answers to the tough pre-interview ques- tions,” she continued, “I thought back to these three key points, and my writing clicked. The same day, I was offered the job. My new manager commended me on my written responses and said that was the deciding factor between me and the other possible hire.” I know of nothing more practical and liberating than writing, speaking, reading, and thinking well.

Four years ago, a friend—a retired professor and former Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine—visited my class in writing at Madison College to see how teaching and learning at our college differed from that at his college. He audited classes the entire year. He really liked Madison students, and they liked him so much that they would ask about him when he missed class (he was serving on a national board that was examining how to improve the college education of pre-vet students). My friend said that the 18- and 19-year-olds were receiving a genuine liberal education, not just learning about the craft of writing and speaking. He joined in class discussion, so it was unique—teaching to an audience separated by 55 years in age. When students came to class, well-prepared, he said, the atmo-

sphere and discussions were “electric.” Every student at M. S. U., I believe, deserves such a rich, rigorous, and rewarding experience, combining learning that is liberat- ing and practical.

A year after I had become a working retiree, a student told me that during the fall semester she and her father had begun to reconcile their estrangement. “What are you studying this semester?” he asked in a telephone conversation near the end of the term. “Barbara Myerhoff’s work about elderly Jews in Venice, California,” she replied. “They are 65-95 years old, and they teach us how to age and die well.” During the Christmas break, this young woman and her dad continued the discus- sion about death, grief, and renewal. Her twin sister joined them. The three even discussed what they wanted done in the case of their ever being diagnosed as brain-dead: they would want to donate as many organs as they could to people in need of such tissue or organs.

Six months later, the student’s father was involved in a horrific motorcycle accident, leaving him brain-dead. Because of the earlier discussions, however, his family was able to donate several of his organs. A year later, my student and her

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twin sister received a letter from another pair of 19-year-old twin daughters in another state. “We want to thank you for your father’s invaluable gift. Thanks to him and you, his heart is beating in our father’s body now.”

I have always considered teaching a healing art as well as an expression of hospitality when it is done well. Today I continue teaching a monthly book club discussion at our church and a group writing life stories. I will continue to teach inside the classroom, outside the classroom, or both until I die. I will continue to write what I want to write, travel, and heed the call of grandchildren. The decision to become a working retiree was one of the most significant choices in my life.

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