

This edition of Quaker Higher Education focuses on the theme of effective teaching. **Mike Heller**, recently retired from the Department of English at Roanoke College, shares his reflections on the impact of FAHE colleagues on his academic and teaching career. The insights Mike provides from his interactions with an earlier generation of Quaker educators reveal, in his words, “models of what it means to be a scholar, a teacher, a Quaker.” From these educators we learn much about the secrets of good teaching and the uniqueness of FAHE conferences. I won’t disclose the remarkable moral contained in Mike’s essay concerning the falling old tree and successful instruction. Interested readers will have to find that gem on their own.

**Jeradi A. Cohen**, assistant professor of education at Wilmington College, offers her thoughts on a teaching scenario that stresses the value of getting to know students as individuals. In an educational environment that emphasizes high-stakes accountability, testing, and data-driven assessments of learning, taking time to focus on a more inclusive view of student, family, and community is long overdue. The personal reflections and poems her students share illuminate the value of this technique, both as a way of fostering meaningful learning and as a means of building bridges between classroom content and the hearts and minds of our students.

Musician, lyricist, and poet, **Carrie Newcomer** extends the theme of mutuality and dialogue in the educational process in three poems, “Learning to Sit With Not Knowing,” “A Note to Myself While Walking (Because I Sometimes Forget),” and “Three Gratitudes.” A graduate of

Goshen College, Carrie has collaborated with Quaker philosopher and author, Parker J. Palmer. With reference to her poem “Learning to Sit With Not Knowing,” she writes, “This one would be interesting for folks in education. In education there is pressure to be the experts to give what we know. But sometimes we learn from our students. There are things we only encounter if we open the space of not knowing for what might show up.”

Taken together, these three pieces encourage us to open pathways of understanding and interest in our relations with students.

Paul Moke  
Wilmington College

In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, FAHE and Earlham College decided to postpone the annual conference until June of 2021. As a result, the editors of QHE wish to extend a special invitation to all interested authors to submit essays for possible publication in our upcoming fall and spring 2021 publications.

**Submissions:** *QHE* is published twice a year, in the spring and the fall. Articles submitted for possible publication should be sent as Word documents to:

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*QHE* is not wed to any particular referencing format; you may use the professional style of your choice. If you would like to discuss an idea that you have for an article, please email us.

## *In Praise of FAHE*

### Mike Heller<sup>1</sup>

In June 1987, when I was writing my dissertation and filled with doubts about completing it and finding a teaching job, the way opened for me to attend my first FAHE conference. I borrowed my parents' new Oldsmobile and headed west through the Arizona desert toward Whittier, California. I had time to think. The road trip and the wide desert landscape were opening mental space. I turned up the volume on the car's sound system to hear the driving rhythm of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

Late in the afternoon, I pulled into the Whittier College parking lot and looked for where I was to sign in and find my dorm room. Walking across the Whittier campus that first evening, I was anxious and hopeful like a kid on the first day of school. The FAHE Friends were welcoming. Soon I was sitting at dinner with others and getting to know people. I couldn't have known then that attending this relatively small conference would be a turning point for me. I would meet Quaker educators from across the nation. Little did I know the extent to which they would help shape my career and my life as a Quaker. Two of those who reached out a helping hand, and even became mentors, were Sterling Olmsted and Phil Moulton. But there would be many others who would become friends.

Recently I came across a quotation by Elise Boulding that describes the Quaker understanding of life as a gradual journey of awakening. She speaks of the Quaker insistence that each person has to do this themselves. In Elise's words, "No one is allowed to get it secondhand by accepting a ready-made creed" (p. 14). I had graduated from West Point and completed my five years of army service – a time in my life

when I felt I had lost my way. I felt deeply conflicted and was more depressed than I realized. After the army, Becky and I returned to Phoenix, Arizona, where we had gone to high school and where our families lived. We became Quakers in the Tempe Meeting, and I began teaching high school English. Seven years later, I went back to graduate school and by 1987 was worried about the next steps in my career. A Friend at the Tempe Meeting, Carl Wallen, suggested I go to the Friends Association for Higher Education conference at Whittier, make contacts, and learn about job possibilities. I hadn't heard of FAHE, but I liked the idea of an organization for Quaker college and university educators.

In the army I had been in a kind of mental exile, and even ten years later was still recovering, still feeling I had betrayed something within myself. I had outwardly been successful but it felt like a series of failures. The word "repent" has a meaning which speaks to what I needed. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book *The Last Week*, talk about Jesus's final journey to Jerusalem and the days leading to the crucifixion and resurrection. They explain that the word "repent" had a different meaning when the Gospel of Mark was written than it did for later Christians. Borg and Crossan write that "From the Hebrew Bible, [repent] has the meaning of 'to return,' especially 'to return from exile,' an image also associated with 'way,' 'path,' and 'journey.' The roots of the Greek word for 'repent' mean 'to go beyond the mind that you have'" (p. 25). In this sense, the journey was taking me beyond the mind that I had. The way had begun to open a decade earlier, when I left the army and found my first teaching job. The healing was a long gradual process.

The way had also opened when John Woolman's writings became the focus of my dissertation. I knew that many Ph.D. students grew overly tired of their dissertation topics. I was fortunate to be studying Woolman. I didn't want

to just close the door on my dissertation and put it behind me as if it were a bad dream. I wanted to have Woolman with me through the rest of my life. At the Whittier conference, I felt privileged to be around Quakers from colleges and universities from across the country who shared my deepest values.

That first night at Whittier, Gilbert White, an elderly man in a dark suit, gave a keynote address to perhaps seventy-five of us in the audience. I don't remember what he said, but I liked the way he spoke. I learned that remarkably he had been the President of Haverford College in his thirties, then went on to the University of Chicago and the University of Colorado, where he did groundbreaking research in water management and the problems of people living in floodplains. I was impressed. I began to realize these Quakers were no slouches. The next morning, I heard a talk by Richard Wood, Earlham College's President. I don't remember what he said either, but after being in the high-pressure environment of graduate school, I was impressed with his being at ease enough to speak with no notes.

I didn't know that behind the scenes, FAHE's leaders were meeting to determine the organization's future, which was very much in doubt. FAHE might have to be laid down. I didn't know at the time that Linda Eliason, Nelson Bingham, Ron Rembert, and others were struggling with the situation and seeking a way for FAHE to survive. I didn't know they were going through a kind of trial by fire. But because of their good work, FAHE survived and continued its quiet power to influence people's lives. In the conference planners' effort to make FAHE viable, they organized the program differently than it would be in later years. The program included "Reports from Discipline Groups" – the Humanities, Interdisciplinary Education, Sciences, and Social Sciences. There were "Interest Groups" – on Excellence and

Equality, Religious Language, and Social Responsibility. And there were "Task Forces" – on Quaker Intervisitation, College Services to Friends Meetings, International Education, and Peace and Quaker Studies. The program planners were trying hard to serve the Quaker colleges as well as individual educators on those campuses and non-Quaker campuses. I heard presentations by people I would come to know over the next few years, not only Linda Eliason and Nelson Bingham, but also Irwin Abrams, Stephen Collett, Shirley Dodson, Earl Redding, Lon Fendall, John Punshon, and Paul Mangelsdorf.

I didn't know that someone at the conference found out I was writing my dissertation on John Woolman, and passed my name along to Sterling Olmsted, a retired provost and English professor devoted to studying Woolman. Back in Arizona, I received a phone call a few months later from Sterling. In his normally scratchy, distinctive voice, he asked, "Could you be on a panel about John Woolman at next summer's conference on Human Betterment?" "I sure could," I said. This invitation was another turning point for me and the beginning of my working relationship with Sterling.

The next June, I flew from Phoenix to Philadelphia and went to Swarthmore College for the 1988 Conference on Quaker Studies for Human Betterment (QSHB), an outgrowth of FAHE inspired by Kenneth Boulding. I met not only Sterling, but also Phillips P. Moulton, who had edited the standard volume of Woolman's writings. Sterling and Phil would become models for me of what it meant to be a scholar, a teacher, and a Quaker. Both had had long careers teaching and were still active in their research and writing. Both befriended me like wise, supportive uncles. It was as if I had been climbing a mountain, digging in my fingers and toes to make my way up a craggy cliff face. Sterling and Phil each reached out a hand to help me to

the next ledge. They offered the encouragement that I think many young educators need.

Sterling, in his mid-seventies, was of medium height, and had a friendly smile. In Quaker worship at many FAHE conferences, he offered vocal ministry about a current event that weighed on him and how he saw it in terms of a Quaker principle. He liked to quote Woolman. He reminded us to “consider the connection of things” (p. 247), a statement through which Woolman, far ahead of his time, expressed the understanding that all life is connected and mutually dependent. Another favorite was that “The true felicity of man in this life, and that which is to come, is in being inwardly united to the fountain of universal love and bliss” (p. 249). For Woolman being “united” to the inward spirit was the source of happiness, and to be separated from that spirit was devastating. Sterling took Woolman’s and Gandhi’s writings to heart. He often spoke of Gandhi as “a practical idealist,” reminding us that nonviolent ideals can address the world’s problems. On the panel, Sterling spoke on “Woolman and Gandhi and Human Betterment or the Yoga of Peacemaking.” He said, “for both Woolman and Gandhi, this integral, consistent, and continual peacemaking, went far deeper than technique or attitude change” (p. 44-45). This essay would later be published *The Tendering Presence: Essays on John Woolman*.

Neil Snarr wrote, in an essay honoring Sterling, that he had been sickly as a child and the doctor said in his presence, “He won’t live to be fourteen” (p. 320), but Sterling survived his early years, went on to college, in 1940 earned a Ph.D. in English at Yale, and served in the army during World War II. He and Barbara were new to Quakers when he decided to enlist. Sterling liked to tell the story of “a kind elderly Quaker woman who thought he was a good Quaker boy gone wrong, saying to him, ‘I am sorry thee has joined the world’s people’” (p. 320). Because

Sterling knew about my army experience, he liked to tell me World War II stories. As an enlisted man with a Ph.D., he was made the company clerk. “Why are you here?” asked an officer in a loud voice, as if Sterling were shirking his duty by sitting behind a typewriter. “Sir, I think it’s because I have a Ph.D. in English,” Stirling replied. “Is that so?” “Yes, sir. Yale 1940.” “Well ... then carry on.”

As I got to know Sterling, I admired the way his writing seemingly came easy. He achieved an attractive, readable, prose style which I associate with the 1930s and 40s. Well into his 90s, he still wrote with this clear prose and he still actively did research on Woolman and Gandhi. Phil Moulton also had a gentle, winning way about him. When we were on the QSHB panel, he was in his late seventies and somewhat frail. In the summer humidity of the Philadelphia suburbs, Phil wore a gray suit-jacket over shorts revealing his skinny legs, with black socks, and black dress shoes. Coming from Arizona, I thought this must be an East Coast old-man style. I was amazed that anyone would dress like this. But Phil didn’t seem to care if he looked a bit silly.

As I got to know Phil, he shared with me his long process of editing Woolman’s writings. Like Sterling, Phil had earned a Ph.D. from Yale. He was a careful scholar. Through close study of the surviving Woolman manuscripts, he discovered that all the previous Woolman editions were based upon the wrong manuscript. Eventually his hard work led to the publication of *John Woolman’s Journal and Major Essays*, published by Oxford University Press. He wrote important essays on Woolman’s ethics. On the panel, Phil spoke on “Woolman’s abiding contribution to human welfare” in terms of “the relationship between his religious convictions and his ethics” (p. 13).

Phil had a long interest in social justice and pacifism. In a posthumous tribute to him, written not long after his death, his wife Mary wrote that as a young man “Phil’s beliefs became increasingly radical as he studied the New Testament. A student in a course he taught at the Cleveland YMCA, Isabel Needham (later Bliss), loaned him a copy of Woolman’s *Journal*, saying, ‘I think you’ll find ideas similar to yours.’ Phil said it was like a homecoming, a validation and a great expansion of what he had been trying to work out by himself” (p. 311). Phil had a kindness about him and a persuasive, diplomatic manner. While teaching as a visiting scholar at the University of Michigan, even as a pacifist he was invited to a weekly lunch and discussion with a group of military officers who were pursuing graduate degrees in history. During eight years with that group he wrote *Ammunition for Peacemakers*, in which he offered “ammunition” for refuting arguments for “peace through strength” often used to justify military and foreign-policy positions (p. 313).

Phil and Sterling confirmed what I think I already knew – that I could bring my own heart and ideals to my scholarship on Woolman. I am thankful for how they came into my life just when they did. My presentation on the 1988 QSHB panel, “John Woolman and the Teaching of Writing,” was published as an essay in the conference proceedings. It gave me something to list in my very brief CV. Going back to read that essay, I find ideas that guided me through my career. The essay begins, “In reading John Woolman’s essays and *Journal* we can observe a Quaker process that leads from withdrawal to return, from contemplation to principled action, from private thoughts to public writings. For several years, a few friends and I have been working on ways to apply such a process to the teaching of writing” (p. 19). I was discovering the way writing, teaching writing, and Quaker worship were woven together in my life. The essay continues, Woolman “seems to me a good

model for teaching writing, not for students to emulate his views on social or economic justice, but for students to see a way of working outward from their inward sources” (p. 23). When I wrote those lines, I was writing my dissertation on Woolman. The graduate school ethos did not nurture these ideas; however, the ideas were simmering within me. Being with Quaker scholars and teachers, like Sterling and Phil, I took the risk of expressing what my heart and mind were working on. I am surprised to see that early on I knew or felt these ideas experientially, yet they would gradually shape my teaching and writing career.

One opportunity seemed to open into another. In a few years, I was asked to serve on the FAHE Executive Committee. The first meeting took place in Oskaloosa, Iowa, to plan the next June’s conference at William Penn College. On that committee, I got to know Linda Eliason, a music professor at William Penn College, Ron Rembert, a philosophy professor at Wilmington College, Lonnie Valentine, a professor of peace and justice studies at Earlham School of Religion, Irwin Abrams, a retired history professor from Antioch College and an authority on the Nobel Peace Prize, and Paul Mangelsdorf, a retired physics professor at Swarthmore College. Sterling was there, too. Late on a cloudy afternoon at Quaker Hill, we gathered in a conference room for our meeting. Ron asked us to settle into the longest centering worship I had yet experienced. At the beginning of a meeting, I expected a few minutes of centering worship, but this seemed to me to go on and on, perhaps for twenty minutes or more. I was such a newbie. I am sure Ron felt we especially needed a long worship to prepare ourselves for the business at hand. In that weekend’s meetings, these Friends brought much wisdom to our discussions. I especially felt Irwin, Paul, and Sterling – the elders of the group – spoke from many years of Quaker experience.

In the mid-1990s, Sterling invited me to work with him on a series of Nonviolent Social Change Sourcebooks. To work with him became for me a gift of cooperation and collaboration. Out of that work, we completed a book on Woolman and another on Gandhi. As we worked on these books, Sterling and Barbara hosted me at their home in Wilmington, Ohio. Sterling cooked supper, and when I came to the table, he brought out a roast beef. I had become a vegetarian and didn't know what to do. But I politely ate my portion of the roast. I took comfort from learning later that even the Buddha ate meat when others served it to him. On that trip I also learned to appreciate how much Barbara was doing. For one thing, she had been deeply involved with the committee that edited the new Quaker hymnal, *Worship in Song*.

In the 90s, I was asked to lead a workshop on Woolman at Pendle Hill. I invited Phil and Mary Moulton to come along. They accepted on the condition that I meet them at their home in Sandy Spring, Maryland, and drive them in their car. When I arrived to pick them up, they served a simple lunch of sandwiches, then we took off. Mary sat in the passenger seat beside me. Phil sprawled in the backseat. His body's thermostat was off kilter, so he stripped down to his white briefs. Mary had warned me that he would do this. He enjoyed singing to Mary and he got a kick out of playfully singing for both of us the lyrics "Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes." Of course, I didn't know the song. Mary explained that the actual lyrics were "No, no, a thousand times no" – a song made famous by Mae Questel in a 1935 Betty Boop cartoon. As we drove on the interstate toward Pendle Hill, I wondered what a state policeman might say about Phil sitting in the backseat in only his underwear. I have fond thoughts of getting to know Paul and Mary Mangelsdorf. Paul was another FAHE elder. He had white hair and a white beard, and a kind way about him. For many years, he and Mary did all the leg-work to set up a great

bookstore on each campus where the FAHE conference met. This involved shipping many boxes of books, selling books, and then packing up the books. They lived near Swarthmore College. When the conference took place at Swarthmore, Haverford, Bryn Mawr, or Pendle Hill, Paul gave people rides to and from the Philadelphia airport. One time riding in the car with him, we talked about teaching.

"Do you know the secret of good teaching?" Paul asked as he steered the car. "Tell me," I said. "I want to hear." "When Bob Fetter's father, Frank Fetter, had been retired a long time, he was visiting at our house," Paul said. "A man and woman stopped by who had had him as their economics professor many years before. Frank remembered not only what towns they came from, but also remembered the topics of their senior essays. Frank was very interested in his students. That's the secret to good teaching – to be interested in students." That lesson stayed with me. It was about valuing each student as an individual and a human being.

I came away from FAHE conferences inspired and recharged for teaching, even more than from my disciplinary conferences. Perhaps this was because at FAHE we shared teaching experiences from across the disciplines and within a spiritual context of valuing each student as a human being with great potential. Ron Rembert recently said in an email that his experience was much the same: "I was always impressed with how participants at FAHE viewed our conferences as so different and distinct when compared with other academic arenas. FAHE did not foster competition, rigor in a narrow sense, embattled debates, etc. but rather views of scholarship and teaching that invited integration of one's academic and spiritual lives." Two good essay collections grew out of these conferences: Anne Dalke and Barbara Dixson's *Minding the Light: Essays in Friendly Pedagogy* and

Donn Weinholtz, Jeffrey Dudiak, and Donald A. Smith's *Quaker Perspectives in Higher Education*. The latter is the first in a [book series](#) published by FAHE based on Quaker perspectives in the academic disciplines.

In those early years at FAHE, one of the great privileges for me was being with Kenneth and Elise Boulding. It's an understatement to say they were remarkable people. Paul Mangelsdorf delivered an especially moving memorial address for Kenneth at the 1993 FAHE conference at Earlham College. In one passage from that memorial, Paul wrote the following about QSHB, but his words apply equally well to FAHE:

Now, as I look back at the accomplishments of QSHB, I see that the focus on actual material human betterment has not been as sharp as Kenneth Boulding might have hoped, but something else quite marvelous has happened. People have come together to discuss their research, whatever it has been, in an atmosphere of Quaker fellowship, with periods even of silent worship between papers, and people have felt free to explore the spiritual significance of their research. Young people who did not know this was possible, especially young people teaching at secular institutions, have found it overwhelming. Lives have been changed. (pp. 31-32)

Even when presenters did not directly explore "the spiritual significance of their research," I felt we were together in this enterprise. FAHE equally served people at Quaker colleges and at non-Quaker institutions.

In the memorial, Paul described Kenneth's amazingly influential career, having produced at least, "three dozen books, 800 articles and three volumes of religious poetry" (p. 28). Kenneth

made tremendous contributions to economics, general systems theory, and peace studies. To hear him speak and experience the breadth of his knowledge, there is a 1987 interview available on YouTube: "Conversations with History: Kenneth Boulding," in which he talks about "National Security through Stable Peace." Paul said this of Kenneth's presentation style:

What he was truly best at was preaching, despite that stammer which afflicted him from earliest boyhood. When I first heard him speak, at Swarthmore, sometime in the late 1940s, I found that stammer very troubling to listen to, but in recent years, especially here at FAHE, I hardly ever noticed it. It didn't go away, but it seemed to have turned into a kind of vocal punctuation that he used for dramatic effect.

I would never miss a chance to hear Kenneth speak – not so much because I was perfectly persuaded by his message, but because his style and his wit were so wonderful. He would toss out ideas and comparisons that lit up the intellectual landscape like lightning bolts at night. (p. 28).

I remember seeing Kenneth between sessions, or during lunch sitting in the grass, writing sonnets. I was amazed at the seeming ease with which he wrote in such a difficult poetic form. Sometimes he shared bits of verse in a conference session, always with his attractive stammer. Paul ended his memorial by quoting the following sonnet by Kenneth:

#### Sonnet for Death

Now, on his padding feet, Death comes to steal  
My old friends one by one. The rough wind  
lashes  
The wide, familiar scene, and cruelly dashes  
The landmarks down until my senses reel.

Death, I am mindful, serves the general weal –  
But oh, it is the noblest tree that crashes  
When its time comes, and how its fall makes  
gashes  
In the green forest tent, most hard to heal!

Then will the forest thrive – or must it perish,  
Tree by old tree in each successive gale?  
Only new seeds, new growth, can spell the tale;  
If new life outweighs death, the forests flourish.  
So must I strive for increase, though I know  
I too must fall, to let the forests grow. (p. 34)

Paul said of this sonnet, “And now it is our jobs as Quaker educators to bring along those new seeds, that new growth, so that these forests may flourish despite the fall of this, our truly noblest tree” (p. 34).

Equally meaningful for me were the times with Elise Boulding. Her career and publishing in the sociology of the family and peace education were as admirable as Kenneth’s accomplishments. Mary Lee Morrison, in her biography *Elise Boulding: A Life in the Cause of Peace*, observed that “Elise Boulding’s contributions to peace and the grounding she received for her subsequent theoretical work began in her early life, as an immigrant child born to parents with high expectations, and in her marriage to internationally known Quaker economist and poet Kenneth Boulding. Throughout her life, Elise always used her immediate experiences to add meaning to her existence” (p. 9). She especially built her academic work upon her experiences raising a family. Morrison continued, “To paraphrase a family friend, she ‘is a person who has been able to stretch so far the limits of human experience that she could address the United Nations with no problem and then, in the next second, stoop to tie a child’s shoe and be aware of the needs of both at the same time’” (p. 9). Elise’s life and work confirmed for me the importance of encouraging students to value their own experience as a resource for discovery.

Reading about “The Spiritual Journey” in the *2013 Resource for Faith and Practice of the Baltimore Yearly Meeting*, I recently came across the following, particularly meaningful passage about Elise, from which I quoted at the beginning of this essay:

Elise Boulding reminded us that central to the Quaker way is the experience of discovery, a journey which is lifelong. She emphasized that what is discovered is not a unique property of Quakerism: “What is unique to the Religious Society of Friends is its insistence that the discovery must be made by each of us individually. No one is allowed to get it secondhand by accepting a ready-made creed. Furthermore, the discovery points to a path and demands a journey, and gives you the power to make the journey.” (p. 14)

This life-long process of discovery rings true for me. As Elise said, “No one is allowed to get it second hand by accepting a ready-made creed.” The discovery “demands a journey, and gives you the power to make the journey.” I didn’t know in 1987 how my career as a college educator and my journey as a Quaker were becoming intertwined. Reading, thinking, worshipping, and study as a Quaker inspired my teaching and research, and my relationships with students. And my research and experiences as a professor deepened and inspired growth in my spiritual journey. FAHE was one place that fostered both.

We can’t predict how our small actions might encourage others. In FAHE, we can be mindful of how we help first-time attenders at a conference, and how we follow up with them. We can give thought to what we offer anyone who walks through the door. We can let others know what we have to offer.

FAHE gave me friendships and spiritual gifts that continue to support me. As I look back at lists of conference participants, I am amazed by how many meaningful friendships were formed and by how many creative people I met. I am reminded of an excellent article about Toni Morrison in *The New Yorker* in which Hilton Als talks about *Song of Solomon* and the healer Pilate's extraordinary speech near the end of her life (p. 69). Pilate says she wishes she had known more people: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (p. 336). I wish I could again be with the people at each FAHE conference and value the moments with each person.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> My deep appreciation to James W. Hood, Charles M. Katz, Paul Moke, Ron Rembert, and Donn Weinholtz for reading an early draft of this essay and sharing their observations and suggestions.

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## ***Learning "Where This Student is From": Teacher Candidates Collecting Community Data***

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My teacher preparation program at the University of Michigan served me well, well enough to land my first professional position. I began my career as a fifth-grade teacher. The climate of the era and community of the profession were very different then than now. High stakes testing had not become one of the driving forces measuring success of students and teachers alike. Data-derived instruction had yet to emerge.

Across the ensuing decades I have remained in the field of education in a variety of roles. I have witnessed many changes along the way. I'm not sure the word "data" was ever men-

tioned in my teacher training program. I feel that I never heard the word until I entered my master's degree program. Today's teacher candidates enter a high-stakes, accountability-fraught environment. They are taught how to assess, gather data, and interpret results to plan for optimal instruction. Evaluation of teachers especially in the last five years has moved in the direction of data determining a teacher merit. Improvements in the ability to determine students' academic learning are increasingly finely-tuned.

Academics reign supreme in many educational settings. While still in the public sector of education I attended regular meetings held by the principal to determine how scores in a particular grade and content might be improved. Our principal never scheduled meetings to help us determine looking beyond test scores and more closely examining who these students in front of us were. This is not surprising. Traditional education training asks teachers to focus on maintaining the status quo. Teachers are not asked or encouraged to take a broader, more inclusive view of student, family, and community as described by Emdin (2017). If you want to truly teach your students, you must reach beyond the walls to the classroom.

While a course in human growth and development remains one of the core courses taken in teacher preparation programs, once in the field teachers are often left to their own insights and devices to ascertain the humanness of the student they teach. Understanding and knowing the students being taught is not a priority, so it is left to chance to what degree teachers will devote valuable class time to reaching out their students at a different level. Unfettered, open moments for knowing and connecting with students are at a premium. After all, these types of actions will not yield data that can be used to determine student academic growth.

As teacher education faculty, we ensure that our students know state standards and licensing

regulations. We coach our students and review with them so that state measures of their proficiency will result in a long-awaited license. They learn methods and strategies and a variety of ways to differentiate instruction for the myriad of learners that will inhabit their classrooms. However, students should not only be able to interpret data who will come to them in copious amounts from structured assessments. We need to foster and maintain a mindset and heart that our novice teachers hear, see, and truly know who their students are.

Using data points to plan differentiated instruction is only part of the picture. Schwartz (2016) alludes to this in her book, *I Wish My Teacher Knew*, where she describes the enlightening, the technique she uses to know her students. She writes on the board, “I wish my teacher knew...” (p. 3) and invites her students to take a slip of paper and complete the sentence. She explains the power of this simple statement:

In my own journey to become an effective third-grade teacher, it is not enough for me to have content knowledge and well-developed instructional methods. If my students are to meet every inch of their academic potential, I must understand the barriers what exist for them. Otherwise, I run the risk of teaching with unchecked biases. (p. 44)

The assignment I have created uses a different form of data so that hopefully our teacher candidates may know more about who their students truly are. The assignment I now use with my students evolved from two professional events during the summer of 2018 in concert with ideas from a teacher, author, and activist whose works I have read and whom I have heard

speak on various occasions, George Ella Lyons of Kentucky.

In the summer of 2018, I attended a workshop on project-based and service-based learning. The sponsoring organization, Community Works Institute, was new to me, but their mission closely aligns with the intent and values at Wilmington College. The format and approach were eclectic and open. The workshop allowed us to discuss, think, and formulate in an unstructured manner personal “takes-away’s” we would implement in our particular teaching scenarios. One area of emphasis was community, what it contributes to an individual and what it may deny an individual. The context of where someone resides and considers themselves “from” shapes who they are. At the close of this institute I began mulling over what type of assignment I could construct from the experiences I had that would convey to my students’ understanding more fully “where their students are from.” I recalled the works of Lyons, and specifically her “Where I’m From” poetic form (Lyons, n.d.).

At my next professional event that same summer, I arrived early at one of the sessions. A teacher who came and sat next to me struck up a conversation. I spoke to her about how we might know our students better. She said she uses a bookbag dump. She invites students on a one-on-one basis to sit and dump the contents of their bookbag and have a conversation. These bookbags reveal favorite possessions that travel every day to school with child but are never seen. A special book or toy may be tucked in there, never revealing itself inside the classroom but providing comfort as a silent amulet traveling ever day with the child. Winter gloves in need of renewal or papers from weeks past that parents have never reviewed may also tumble out on the table. She described how this activity revealed to her aspects of her students she had not known and would never know without engaging in this activity. The contents spark per-

sonal conversations that uncover facets of her students she might never have discovered through the routine examination of traditional facts and figures.

The assignment that evolved contains three parts: 1) Create a personal *Where I'm From* poem; 2) Data Gathering; and 3) a *Where I'm From* poem from the perspective of a selected student as well a final Reflection on the merits of the process.

During the first phase of the assignment, my students at Wilmington College compose a personal *Where I'm From* poem. The attributes for writing a *Where I'm From* poem consist of reflecting on one's past in terms of the senses. Sights, sounds, smells, visuals, and textures combine to paint a sensory portrait of the writer. Lyons provides an excellent example on her web site, and my students begin with reading this example.

When I read through the *Where I'm From* poems from my students, I experience them in a new light. I sometimes laugh and other times become teary-eyed. The writings reveal aspects of my students I never knew about. Below are examples written by two different students. Their poems substantially changed my perception of who had been sitting in my previous classes. I experienced their humanness amid a collection of the people, experiences, and influences in their lives that created the sum total of who they are:

Poem #1 (Amber)

*I'm from manure  
From its richness and promise of life  
I'm from cool concrete floors  
From scrambling up hay bales and over  
fences*

*From crowding together to stand by the  
heater then back into the cold*

*And from gloves, my Pa's*

*Too big but the warmest I'd ever worn*

*I'm from the sticky new life of a lamb*

*Dried off with paper towels and hope*

*I'm from rain on a metal roof*

*And from wide open days*

*When the sky stretched like a bowl across  
the horizon*

*Everything in it bright with promise*

*I'm from Phyllis and Jerry's boy*

*I'm from the Kincaid Clan*

*From pond muck*

*And the glittering scales of a fish pulled into  
the sun*

*On days so hot the only relief was the water*

*I'm from the emerald green light that filtered  
through the silent leaves*

*The secret daffodils that thrive there*

*The slide into the creek worn by my moth-  
ers' childhood*

*I'm from cats of every shape and color*

*Their softness and my watering eyes and  
nose as I held them close*

*I'm from card games late into the night*

*A box of wooden blocks*

*And meals crowded around the long table*

*Staying there long after the plates were  
cleared*

*(no one wanted to leave the bright circle of  
talk and joy and love)*

*I'm from an ancient farmhouse*

*With creaking stairs and coal still in the cel-  
lar*

*I'm from music*

*From working hard and thinking smart*

*From staying in and singing out*

*I'm from being too busy*

*And walking tall*

*And finding joy and giving thanks*

*And a room made just so in a home built of  
love*

*Poem #2 (Savannah)*

*I'm from the brick house*

*on Jonesboro Road*

*with the willow tree in the front yard.*

*I'm from cornfields,*

*barns that stand taller than the houses*

*and grain bins glistening in the sun.*

*I'm from wet, tangled hair in a Chevy truck,*

*windows down, blaring classic rock*

*riding home from a day at the lake.*

*From Little Debbies in my dad's shirt pocket*

*when he got home from work.*

*I'm from huge boots on a little girl*

*following my dad through the woods.*

*I'm from the warm, summer-night air in my  
face,*

*riding four wheelers with friends.*

*I'm from the camper with four bunks,*

*nights under the lights as my dad played  
ball.*

*"Excuse the pig, hog's out to pasture"*

*and "ain't happenin' sis".*

*I'm from bluegrass music on Saturday  
mornings.*

*I'm from "bible thumpers" and alcoholics.*

*From being called Beanah.*

*I'm from my blood family and my step family  
-- don't let the two mix.*

*I'm from caring for a newborn lamb in the  
harsh winter,*

*and playing in the hayloft in the summer,*

*grilling out for dinner.*

*I'm from the smell of soybean dust in the  
grain truck.*

*There's no pizza like the one from Short  
Stop,*

*and no sunrise like the one from your tree  
stand.*

*I'm from overusing "I love you".*

*I'm from Oaklyn, Cody, and Nola*

*my beautiful daughter, incredible fiancé,  
and our fur baby.*

*Building a family of my own,*

*I'm from the little blue house*

*on Center Street*

*with Miss Bell in the front yard.*

During the second phase, students begin the data gathering process. Select one student and complete each of the actions described:

- Walk the streets of the neighborhood where the selected student is from -- be attentive to sights, sounds, smells; take three photographs.
- Walk through the school and try to see it from their student's perspective; take three photographs
- Talk to your student about places in the local community that are most important to him/her. Are there some that are favorites? Some that are scary? Take three photographs that are representative of what your student shared and provide explanation and identification of the areas or places noted.
- Book bag dump – Sit with your student as he/she dumps the contents of their book bag. Have your student explain what he/she keeps in his/her book bag. What things are significant? Unique? Take three photographs.
- Combine the above information gathered as well as the photographs into a single Word document.

This second phase of the assignment allows the teacher candidate to step into the world of his or her selected student. The teacher candidate, although a full-time student in Wilmington, Ohio, may never have walked the streets of the neighborhoods surrounding the school where their student attends. Teacher candidates have little reason to go to the city parks; however, these may be central in the lives of their students. The simple actions of walking the neigh-

borhood streets, noticing signs, and traversing the city parks may provide teacher candidates with a new vision of who their selected student is. Gansz (2004) underscores the importance of actions to change thinking:

Talk is cheap, and actions speak louder than words. It is one thing to voice the mission of a school, quite another thing to live that same mission. Implicit in activism is activity – to take action. Willingness to take action is key, but action is the keyword. One can act one's way to a new way of thinking, but one cannot think one's way to a new way of acting. (p. 12)

As I read through the collected data, life facts about the selected students reveal personal information of importance to them.

One teacher candidate, Ryan, describes his selected student's neighborhood:

First, is UDF, his family and he love to go get ice cream from the local UDF in town. His favorite flavor is chocolate chip cookie dough. Another thing he is used to seeing is, the train tracks. His bus stops at the train tracks and opens its doors to listen for a train. He also hears the train occasionally when it comes throughout the day and night when he is at his house. He also likes the local park, over the summer and even on weekends he goes to the park, and if he's lucky his friends are there too because the park is so local.

Another student, named Iliana, shares here surprise about her student's feelings toward the Neighborhood Watch sign near her house:

The one thing that she talked about that surprised me and made me see her in a whole new light was when she spoke about what scared her. She said that what scared her was the watch sign in the community, but what scared her the most was that no one cared about it. At the moment of the interview I had no idea what this watch sign was, but after asking someone about it, I realized the depth of that comment. I wish I could go back and ask her more about it.

And another teacher candidate writes of the information gleaned from the "book bag dump":

Overall, this student had very typical things in his backpack. Including a pencil, crumpled papers that didn't make it into his folder, his take home folder, and a small toy he brought to play with at recess. He had a green mechanical pencil in his book bag, green is his favorite color and he likes to use mechanical pencils more than regular wooden pencils. But in his classroom they are only allowed at certain times, that is why he has to keep it in his book bag rather than in his pencil case at his desk.

The third and final phase of the assignment requires the teacher candidate to compose a

*Where I'm From* poem from the perspective of their student. Below are two examples.

Poem #1

*I am from my overflowing backpack  
all the books that take me to different worlds  
and my nice black shoes from the talent show  
All the small things I have brought to share with  
my classmates  
that never quite made it out of my bag  
like the little piggy that I got for Christmas*

Poem #2

*I am from rural, small town community,  
I am from UDF ice cream and other treats;  
chocolate chip cookie dough sugar cones,  
I am from the local train that whistles during the  
day and night,  
I am from a close hearted family,  
Taking advantage of sunny days at the park,  
I am from family days at Wilmington College,  
Waiting for the day I get a turn to come here,  
I am from the fear of the dentist,  
But my mom telling me it will be okay*

Additionally, in this third phase the teacher candidates are asked to write a reflection that discusses the merits of this assignment for them as a future educator.

One student stated:

Overall, I felt that the process of writing this poem served as an important reminder that every student I teach will have a life outside of school as rich and complicated as my own, and that those

backgrounds will be different from my own and from the other students.

Another shared that:

It [this assignment] impacted me in many ways. It helped me connect with students on a deeper and more meaningful level. It made me realize that writing can be a vehicle for students to express thoughts without having to speak vocally about them. I learned that my student was extremely talented and passionate about theater and band. I would not have known this if I hadn't done this project.

A third student wrote:

I learned many details about my student's life and gained a perspective about his life that I would not have learned from just teaching lessons. I don't think I would conduct a *Where I'm From* for every student I have in the future, but I do plan to try and understand what my students' lives are like outside of school. Understanding a person's life circumstances is important when trying to build positive relationships.

Bingham (April, 2019)

In a society and a world where socioeconomic differences are increasing, where the gap between rich and poor is expanding, it is vital for all of us to understand each other better...we must invest our time and take the risks of reaching out to others who are different, to others whom we do not know. We must become more familiar with one another, build relationships with one another. (pp. 6 and 8)

Knowing our students is more than numeric data points; it is understanding and considering

the nuances of their lives. Bingham (April, 2019) emphasized this point by stating:

In a society and a world where socioeconomic differences are increasing, where the gap between rich and poor is expanding, it is vital for all of us to understand each other better...we must invest our time and take the risks of reaching out to others who are different, to others whom we do not know. We must become more familiar with one another, build relationships with one another. (pp. 6 and 8)

When teachers consider "where their students are from," their teaching will be better-informed. This information can influence our instruction not only for success on state mandated tests, but in supporting and influencing the lives of our next generation beyond the classroom walls. Jones (2004) suggests in keeping with the purest purpose of education sought by Quakers, "Our classrooms should produce people committed not only to figuring out things and understanding them but also to understanding how truth learned from them applies and to working it out in our lives" (p. 5). Because if you know "where someone is from" you engage in their personal journey. You might never know how much you could brighten a student's day by allowing the use of a green, mechanical pencil or perhaps having a student slip into those special black shoes from the talent show.

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## *“Learning to Sit With Not Knowing”*

### *Carrie Newcomer*

I am learning to sit with not knowing.  
When I don't see where its going,  
Cool my heels and start slowing,  
I am learning to sit with not knowing.

I'm learning to sit with what's next,  
What if and my best guess,  
Be kinder when it's a process,  
I'm learning to live with what next.

**Chorus:** Here's the clear space I've chosen,  
Where the denseness of this world opens,  
Where there's something holding steady and true,  
Regardless of me or you.

I'm learning live with the high stakes  
Trying to befriend my mistakes,  
Lay my hand where my heart aches,  
I'm learning live with high stakes

**Chorus:** Here's the clear space I've chosen  
Where the denseness of this world opens  
Where there's something holding steady and true  
regardless of me or you.

I'm learning to live with what takes time,  
No ribbon across some finish line.  
Stop feeling I'm always a day behind,  
I'm learning to live with what takes time,

I am learning to sit with not knowing.  
when I don't see where this is going  
Cool my heels and start slowing  
I am learning to sit with not knowing.

## *Note to Self When Walking (Because I Forget)*

### *Carrie Newcomer*

When walking in the woods,  
Or on a path,

Or down the street,  
In a store,  
Or just upstairs,  
When you are intent on going,  
Where ever it is you are going,  
Stop.  
Stand Still.

Notice how the mind can chatter,  
Like purple finches in the trees,  
Endlessly clicking and warbling,  
Rising and falling and rising again.  
Notice all your plans and longings,  
All the things you got, but didn't want,  
All you wanted, and didn't get,  
All the circular conversations aimed at changing,  
What was already said or unsaid.  
Notice all the losses you are carrying,  
With as much grace as you can muster.

Notice the sky, the feel of the air on your skin,  
The sounds or what hangs in the silence,  
The hard knot in your throat.  
Notice all these things and more,  
Because there is always more.  
Then let your heart open,  
Even just a crack,

A dribble or a dam break,  
It doesn't matter.  
Because it is in that opening,  
You'll find a clear space  
The one you keep finding  
And losing  
And finding again.

Remember to love it all,  
All of it.  
With what's easy and dear,  
Ephemeral and brilliantly ordinary.  
Wrap compassion like a blanket  
The kind we place tenderly,  
Around other people's shoulders,  
When the disaster is done and the worst is over.  
Love it all,  
Without looking for any way out,  
Not condoning, just allowing,  
For it all to just live,  
Where it lives.

Love everything that broke your heart open  
That changed you forever,  
That made you softer,  
And helped you understand,  
What you could not have understood otherwise.

Love what you've endured,  
Love what you are still enduring.  
Love the purple finches and the sidewalk,  
The view from the upstairs window,  
The brambles and wild asters,  
And the click of the keyboard.

Love all of this  
Small and fragile,  
Big and beautiful,  
Life.

Then take the next step.

## *The Gratitudes* **Carrie Newcomer**

Every night before I go to sleep  
I say out loud  
Three things that I am grateful for,  
All the significant, insignificant  
Extraordinary, ordinary stuff of my life.  
It's a small practice and humble,  
And yet, I find I sleep better  
Holding what lightens & softens my life  
Ever so briefly at the end of the day.  
Sunlight and blueberries,  
Good dogs and wool socks,

A fine rain,  
A good friend,  
Fresh basil and phlox,  
My father's good health,  
My daughter's new job,  
The song that always makes me cry,  
Always at the same part,  
No matter how many times I hear it.  
Decent coffee at the airport,  
And your quiet breathing,  
The story she told me,  
The frost patterns on the window,  
English horns and banjos,  
Wood thrush and June bugs,  
The smooth glassy calm of the morning pond,  
An old coat,  
A new poem,  
My library card,  
And that my car keeps running  
Despite all the miles.

And after three things,  
More often than not,  
I get on a roll and just keep on going,  
I keep naming and listing,

Until I lie grinning,  
Blankets pulled up to my chin,  
Awash with wonder  
At the sweetness of it all.