

REWILD SCHOOL

CEMETERY WALK

All things have a beginning and an end. We do, too; we are ephemeral. But without a “use by” date stamped upon our hand; we tend to believe we have more time than we do. We don’t. Neither did my students. In turn, just like the rest of us, they tended to procrastinate.

To bring a sense of urgency to my students concerning their existence (especially with respect to their time in La Ceiba), sometime before the end of the semester, we visited the local cemetery.

We walked quietly. We walked alone. We touched the headstones and felt their texture. We listened to the sounds of birds, bees, and the leaves above and all around us. We immersed ourselves in the natural environment. After some time alone, we divided into pairs.

We asked each other to imagine the moment when we were on our deathbeds with our families and friends gathered around us. Having imagined this moment, we asked each other to answer the following questions:

- What do you want to say to them?
- What do you want others to know about you?

We came back together as one group and asked each pair to share one insight from their conversation. As they shared, we listened.

It wasn't always so highly structured. On more than a few occasions, we walked alone for as long as we wanted and gravitated back together to lay in the sunlit grass, sit on our elbows, and watch the cumulus clouds pass overhead. Sometimes, I asked, "What do you want to do with your time? What do you want to become? What do you want to create? And maybe, most importantly, have you started?" We would then let whoever had something to say speak and see where it took us. Sometimes, I wouldn't ask questions; we would just bask in the sun.

This exercise confused some students and made others uncomfortable. That was sort of the point. We worked daily to unmoor rookies from the traditional classroom. I can keenly remember Kelly (when she was a rookie) turning to Ana (one of our returnees) and saying:

"Nothing like an existential crisis at 8 in the morning."

Kelly was spot on!

The upbringing was an induced 16-week-long existential crisis.

RESOURCES

Here's a thoughtful addition to this exercise from the ["Art of Noticing"](#)

An interesting article in *The New Yorker* the other day asked "[Are You the Same Person You Used To Be?](#)" While the piece is of course inconclusive on such a sweeping question, it comes at matters of identity over the course of a lifetime from many angles, and it's a thought-provoking read. I recommend it. But ... as I am prone to do ... I got caught up on a passing aside. "Even seemingly unimportant or trivial elements can contribute to who we are," Joshua Rothman writes, musing about a recent family get-together that made him think about how his father's *Star Trek* fandom, however un-vital it may be, is "a through line in my dad's life." He continues:

*“We tend to downplay these sorts of **quirks and enthusiasms**, but they’re **important to who we are**. When Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of James Joyce’s ‘Ulysses,’ wanders through a Dublin cemetery, he is unimpressed by the generic inscriptions on the gravestones, and thinks they should **be more specific**. ‘So and So, wheelwright,’ Bloom imagines, or, on a stone engraved with a saucepan, ‘I cooked good Irish stew.’*

*“**Asked to describe ourselves, we might tend to talk in general terms**, finding the details of our lives somehow embarrassing. But a friend delivering a eulogy would do well to note that we played guitar, collected antique telephones, and loved Agatha Christie and the Mets. **Each assemblage of details is like a fingerprint**. Some of us have had the same prints throughout our lives; others have had a few sets.”*

Maybe this jumped out at me because I’ve been thinking about [friendship and connection](#) a lot lately. And that bit about the hypothetical “friend delivering a eulogy” made me consider how much the practice of attending to others’ “quirks and enthusiasms” is kind of what friendship is about.

Pay attention to those seeming “unimportant and trivial” details (the “fingerprints”) of the people you care about. And find a way to let them know you’re paying attention — to use what you’ve noticed as a way to connect.

While you’re at it, you might **reflect on your own** quirks and enthusiasms. As Rothman suggests, we often downplay such things in considering “who we are,” but they can be important and revealing through lines, as he puts it.

Not to be macabre, but channel Joyce’s Bloom wandering that cemetery, and imagine what specific fact could serve as your distinctly non-“generic” epitaph. List 10 potential answers. **Be specific**. Get your friends (or perhaps classmates or colleagues) to do the same. Compare notes; see what you learn about the details of life that matter to them — and to you.

2. Here's a reading you can share beforehand with your students and then ask them to define their "eulogy virtues" - those values that can help you live a life with no regrets (and not just a life that looks good on résumé paper): <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>

3. Here are a couple of good quotes you could share:

"It is not that we have a short time to live, but that we waste a lot of it. Life is long enough, and a sufficiently generous amount has been given to us for the highest achievements if it were all well invested. But when it is wasted in heedless luxury and spent on no good activity, we are forced at last by death's final constraint to realize that it has passed away before we knew it was passing. So it is: we are not given a short life but we make it short, and we are not ill-supplied but wasteful of it... Life is long if you know how to use it." - Seneca

"Old preachers used to say, when I was growing up, you look on headstones in graveyards, in cemeteries, and you see the name of the person; then you see the year and date they were born, and then a little dash, and the year and date that they died. And the old preachers used to say, the question is not, when were you born? You didn't have anything to do with that. When did you die? — you probably didn't have much to do with that, either. The question is, what did you do with your "dash"? That's the question."

– [Bishop Michael Curry](#)

4. Here are a couple of other resources:

"The human lifespan visually" by Tim Urban:
<https://waitbutwhy.com/2015/12/the-tail-end.html>

Swan Songs for your Final Exit (ask your students to pick their own):
<https://www.npr.org/sections/allsongs/2018/04/17/602879162/swan-songs-music-for-your-final-exit>