

What's It All About? Reflections on Meaning in a Career

By Gary T. Marx

Expanded version of paper forthcoming, in R. Darling and P. Stein, Sociological Lives. This article draws from a paper at the Society for the Study of Social Problems meeting on receipt of a lifetime achievement award (Marx 2011a) and reflections on being at Berkeley in the 1960s (Marx 2011b), as well as other reflections referenced below in endnote 1.

What's it all about?

Michael Caine in *Alfie*

All these tidal gatherings, growth and decay,

Shining and darkening, are forever

Renewed; and the whole cycle impenitently

Revolves, and all the past is future.

Robinson Jeffers *Practical People*

In 1851 Herman Melville wrote to Nathaniel Hawthorne, "I am so pulled hither and thither by circumstances. The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which a [person] ought always to compose, —that, I fear, can seldom be mine." At the height of an active career as a college professor I knew the feeling. But that is the case no longer.

In 1996 I became an emeritus professor, retiring but not shy. The antiquated dictionary definition of "retiring" suggests withdrawal or retreating. But for today's young old that meaning hardly fits. The waters of a former career may divert rather than evaporate. Whether one sits back or continues to work in the "shade of life"¹ seems highly variable. Since leaving fulltime university work, I have remained a member of the chattering classes as an itinerant scholar with occasional teaching jobs in the U.S. and Europe. (Marx 2009, 2012)² I have become an electronic scholar interacting with far flung students I am unlikely to ever meet unmediated by technology.

With retirement I have given increased attention to the "aboutness" of the personal meanings of a career beyond the substantive issues I study. The leisure retirement offers, being away (in an occupational and geographical sense) from the

academy and awareness that lives, as well as careers, have endpoints (however fuzzy) is conducive to introspection and looking back.

In contrast to some articles in this volume that consider new roles undertaken by retired sociologists, I will reflect on, if not a new insight, at least my increased awareness in retirement of teaching (as broadly defined) as a central factor that gave meaning to my career. I begin with a biographical summary.

But first a warning. As a distantiated observer I prefer to shine spotlights, not be under them. Descartes' motto (which might also have been Erving Goffman's) "he lives well who is well hidden" generally applies. I have been in the uncovering business, not in the business of being uncovered—our power, such as it is, is in revealing other's secrets, not our own. I know what I think.³

The social analyst needs to learn about others and not condition the data by showing your own aces until you really have to. Yet apart from the need to know when to hold and when to fold, there is a time to show, particularly if one believes that with age comes wisdom. The old ought at least to be heard sometimes, even if they need to move out of the way.

But audiences must be careful. George Orwell wrote: "an autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful" since the person "who gives a good account of himself is probably lying." As Erving Goffman instructed, attention must be paid to the veracity of self-proclamations. Even when authentic, there is the question of sampling and incompleteness noted by Mark Twain.⁴

Beginnings

I was born on a farm in central California and was riding (or at least carried by) a horse before I was walking, raised in Hollywood, and grew up in Berkeley. I moved to Los Angeles when I was 2. Along the way into early adulthood I had jobs that brought me into contact with worlds beyond a home with a view and a swimming pool in the Hollywood Hills. Among the jobs: box boy, busboy, newsboy, gardener, dishwasher, factory worker, retail (clothing) and wholesale (hobby crafts) salesman. Along with Caryl Chessman, Heidi Fleiss and Leonardo DiCaprio, I attended John Marshall High School, though we never met. The school's seal shows balanced scales of justice emblazoned with *Veritas Vincit* (Truth Conquers). My first exposure to the importance, vagaries and challenges of justice was as Chief Justice of the Student Court.

I attended the University of California at Santa Barbara my first year. I received A grades in my psychology and American history classes --grades that had eluded me during my academically modest high school career, a social career immodestly defined by trying to be as "cool" as I could as a leader, athlete and conspicuous consumer. Perhaps if excellent grades had come more easily, I might have added them to my exterior impression arsenal, but alas they did not. I did just enough work to qualify for college admittance. But as with the other endeavors, it was the prize not the process that mattered.

I have since learned to reverse the emphasis. Note the words of poet Henry Newbolt, "to set the cause above renown, to love the game beyond the prize."

Santa Barbara was then a small school and had only recently moved to its current Goleta campus. Losing the election for sophomore class president and thinking I was missing something important like fraternity parties, I transferred to UCLA after that first year. As a junior, to satisfy a breadth requirement, I happened into a terrific class on deviance and social control and became a sociology major. I was torn between sociology graduate study and law school. After a series of vocational tests, a counselor told me I could become a professor. I didn't quite believe it, but with the draft facing those who were no longer in school, graduate school was inviting.

Most of my friends had decided on law school and that then seemed a bit too conventional and predictable, even if preferable to the business careers of all my relatives. I now wish I had obtained a law degree as a union and credibility card, along with the PhD. I planned to attend the University of Michigan for graduate study for a change of scene and also to be closer to a girlfriend. But when she ended the relationship, the University of California at Berkeley was meteorologically and financially (\$60 a semester) more appealing.

After graduation from UCLA in June of 1960 I left the pastel womb of Los Angeles for Europe and became homeless. Wearing a windbreaker (of the kind that James Dean sported in *Rebel Without a Cause*), a white T-shirt and khaki pants, I proudly walked out onto the tarmac in the late afternoon sun, climbed the ladder to the Pan Am jet and never really returned. That initial trip was to have been just another merit badge on the identity sash of a recent college graduate. I wanted to be thought of by others and myself as the kind of person who had visited Europe.

I left a clean-shaven, saddle shoe'd fraternity boy, conspicuously consuming America's material abundance. I returned bearded and sandaled on the cusp of adulthood, inconspicuously consuming European history, culture and geography. I began seeking only the symbolism of a trip to Europe and ended engulfed in its substance. Instead of a finishing school, Europe was a starting school.

During that carefree summer I was badly bitten by the travel bug, although I resisted the budding provincial's temptation to become Euro-philic and America-phobic. Yet it was as if a fog had lifted and I learned a new way of seeing, acquiring knowledge, enjoying life and being in the world. With hardly a look back in either anger or nostalgia, I simply flew away from the insular, smug, homogeneous, material status world of an adolescence, so bounded and defined by growing up in Hollywood in the 1950s.

At Berkeley, as a righteous 60s student from Los Angeles, (a place at that time that seemed to be the capital of an evil empire of materialism and media induced superficiality), I was lucid about what I didn't want, rather than what I did. With mentors such as Erving Goffman, Charles Glock, Marty Lipset and Neil Smelser the latter quickly changed. After the orals exam, spent a year traveling around the world, including going

by land from Iran to Calcutta. I have written about travel as a personal and professional life theme in Marx (2000).

To varying degrees the question from the epigram that opens this paper underlies the life of scholarship. My academic work consisted of trying to understand the “aboutness” of topics involving race and ethnic relations, collective behavior and social movements, social control and science, technology and society. I pursued these topics through articles in academic and popular media and in books such as *Protest and Prejudice*, *Racial Conflict*, *Muckraking Sociology*, *Collective Behavior and Social Movements: Structure and Process*, *Undercover: Police Surveillance in America*, *Undercover: Police Surveillance in Comparative Perspective* and *Windows into the Soul: Surveillance and Society in An Age of High Technology* and articles at www.garymarx.net. I moved, in a trajectory I could not have predicted, from initial work in race relations and stratification, to social movements and collective behavior, social control, and technology and society and from quantitative to qualitative methods. (Marx 2012)

My first job was in the sociology department at UC Berkeley, but in 1967 I left for a job at Harvard in the Social Relations Department and the Joint Center for Urban Studies working with Daniel P. Moynihan and later at the Harvard Law School Criminal Justice Center with Lloyd Ohlin and Jim Vorenberg. I have written about moving as a farm boy from a state school to the very heart of American academic life in "On Academic Success and Failure: Making It, Faking It, Forsaking It and Reshaping It" (Marx 1990). In 1972 under threat of deserting Cambridge for a tenured position at Columbia, I extended my appointment at Harvard. But after mentors Marty Lipset and Alex Inkeles left for Stanford, it seemed prudent to move down the street (literally) to MIT.

At MIT I was in an urban studies department and that was wonderfully broadening, as I came to understand, with Whitehead, that all ways of seeing are also ways of not seeing. I became an interdisciplinary *social studies* scholar combining scientific and humanistic ways of knowing. I have had visiting appointments, beyond sociology, in political science, law, psychology, and science, technology and society departments and have taught in Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, Austria and China and lectured in Chile, Japan and Australia.

The energy of the 1960s and the ideas of C. Wright Mills, along with the experience of being at MIT with its focus on the practical uses of knowledge, led to increased concern with public policy issues. I have tried (to paraphrase poet Wallace Stevens) "to patch the world as best I can." I have worked with government agencies and commissions, congressional committees, and non-profit groups on issues of inter-group relations, civil liberties, social control, and technology and society and written op-ed articles that helped bring national and international awareness to the social and ethical issues raised by new information technologies.

In 1988 At the age of 50 I became the person I wanted to be with the publication of *Undercover*, a new well received course on surveillance and society, a large NSF grant for the comparative international study of covert police, work with public policy groups and publishing op-eds in the major papers. (Marx 2002) It was an exciting time and I felt better able than ever to balance the competing pressures seen in Kafka's advice ("in the struggle between yourself and the world, back the world") and Voltaire's that "we must cultivate our own garden".

Yet restlessness set in over the next few years. When the dog died and the kids left home for schools in the west, and with aging parents in California, it was time to move on. We had never planned to stay in Cambridge and had initially viewed it as a short term cultural experience. Having been so focused on my research, I was ready to give something back. In 1992 I took a job as a reconstruction engineer, charged as chair with improving the Sociology Department at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Great departments are easier to envision than to build. In an article on 37 moral mandates for sociologists, I indicated what I would like to see in an ideal department. (Marx 1997) The article was a response to what I saw too little of in Boulder. After four years it was time to move on. Phyllis Anne Rakita Marx, my wife of 50 years who passed away in 2013, first developed cancer in 1986. Although she had her own career as a social worker and later teacher and practitioner of landscape design, she always followed me where ever my career opportunities led. Now, in the time remaining, it was her turn and she wanted to be near our grandchildren. So in 1996 we moved to a farm on Bainbridge Island near Seattle, channeling youthful love of Catalina Island and Martha's Vineyard. There were some great fellowships in Palo Alto and Washington DC, fancy visiting professorships and shorter term teaching jobs, but for the majority of the time retirement offered a fellowship for life with nothing but discretionary time to think, recreate, garden and be with family and friends. (Marx 2009).

Cultural Influences on Identity and a Career

A mélange of values, preferences, orientations and beliefs formed the psychic backdrop which ordered a career and defined a sense of self and personal style. These include: — appreciation of the intellect, rationality, empiricism, irony, paradox, thresholds and curvilinear truths, the concrete as against the grand abstraction (but appreciation of mid-range ideal types); authenticity/honesty; surprise; humor; nature reverence and transcendence; resilience; individualism and a naive belief in an almost pre-social self able to endure the slings and spears of destiny and the pressures of the crowd; fascination with the outsider; courage; challenges, relentless perseverance and struggle against the odds; performance; awe, enthusiasm, cool and hot, precision and passion; testing but respecting legitimate limits; and asking "says who and why and based on what empirical, moral, legal and measurement standards and serving what interests?", "are things what they appear to be?" and "who or what is behind the mask and screen?"; initial skepticism and tentativeness, but with awareness of the need to believe and act; and the struggle for justice and being a person of integrity.

The cultural backdrop for the above include (particularly in my formative years) Ayn Rand and her sophomoric characters in The Fountainhead and Atlas Shrugged, Sinatra's swingingly having it his way, Hemmingway, Chandler, Hammet, Bogart, Brando, Newman, Dean, Traven, Kipling, Sartre, Camus, Kerouac, the lyrics of Cole Porter and the Gershwins, the singing of Chet Baker, June Christie, Chris Connor, Anita O'Day, Johnny Cash, Buddy Holly, The Beach Boys and Mose Allison, Southern California in the 30s, 40s and 50s, the hazy, lazy days of summer, the beach and desert, palm trees and stucco homes with red tile roofs, on a clear day you can see Catalina, convertibles and girls, girls, girls. In the background Sandburg, Mencken, Twain, Whitman, Thoreau, Emerson, Conrad, Kafka, Orwell, Huxley and Europe. And closer to home Groucho Marx, Jack Webb, James Dean, Natalie Wood, Lenny Bruce, Mort Sahl, Shelley Berman, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Bobby Kennedy and Erving Goffman.

My gratitude to sociology is unbounded. The discipline has provided many things to me over the decades: role and anti-role models; road maps, an occupational identity and community, remuneration, status, and tools to make sense of questions about justice, inequality, social control and change and authenticity. The university setting offered the lovely illusion of being, as the song says, "forever young" with endless summer vacations and the cost-free asking of questions, without having to provide answers. Nor did one have to take risks in the world beyond the cloister (and with tenure, anonymous reviews, secret ballots and professorial authority, few within it). The calling in the form of the job offered legitimacy and a megaphone to report research findings involving social issues and public policy questions I felt strongly about. In the beginning it also offered optimism.

A Little More History

Early in my career I was fortunate to encounter national leaders of the civil rights movement and to directly experience historical events. The times were changing, although so it seemed. As a student at Berkeley I was active in CORE (The Congress of Racial Equality). Under the sway of positivism and the idealism of youth, it seemed like a career in sociology would be meaningful because it offered a way to bring about social change.

I knew some of the early Black Panthers. Mel Newton, Huey's brother was a friend. Richard Aoki, one of my best students, was a neighborhood friend of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale and was among the first members of the Black Panther party in Oakland. He legally provided them with their first weapons and weapons training and became a Panther Field Marshall.

One of my friends in CORE was Jack Weinberg, a graduate student in math, responsible for popularizing the statement "never trust anyone over 30" (which with the wisdom and tentativeness of aging I would suggest reversing to "never trust anyone *under* 30" or maybe even 40.) Weinberg's arrest for sitting at the CORE table at the entrance to the campus on Telegraph Avenue and Bancroft Way was the event that triggered the Free Speech Movement.

I sat at that table a few months before, giving out information and seeking donations (the table can be seen in the film "Berkeley in the 60s.") Reminiscent of Sorokin who was deep in the library reading and missed a central event that led to the first Russian revolution, at the time of the Free Speech Movement in December of 1964 I was in India looking for art in caves and meaning in life. I have often wondered whether my life would have been different had I been still sitting at the CORE table and been arrested instead of Jack.

Malcolm X came to Berkeley in 1961. He was an amazing speaker and a marvelous illustration of C.W. Mills' call for showing how personal troubles could reflect broader social problems. His personal tales of victimization, imprisonment and redemption, his energy, eloquence, delivery, humor and cries against racial injustice were stirring and affecting. Yet when with the same forcefulness and passion he began talking about Yakub, a black scientist who created the evil white race thousands of years ago, I was in disbelief. Earlier in the semester I heard Eric Hoffer speak and was troubled to see so many remnants of the true believer in Malcolm X. I was incredulous and wondered if this might not just be a mobilizing device and was pleased, and not surprised, when he later rejected the more debatable aspects of that theology.

Shortly after I was inspired by hearing Norman Thomas speak. He ran for president many times on the socialist party ticket—important aspects of his program were taken over by Roosevelt in the 1932 election. Thomas said, "I am not the champion of lost causes, but of causes not yet won." A few months later we picketed a more successful presidential candidate—John F. Kennedy over issues of disarmament and discrimination in federal housing projects and then went to the Berkeley Greek theater to be inspired (perhaps against our initial will) by his eloquence and his substance as the first U.S. president born in the 20th century. A bit later I was on the outer circle of policy advisors for Robert F. Kennedy's presidential bid.

Bayard Rustin a founder of CORE and the strategist for the civil rights movement and leader of the March on Washington wrote the introduction to *Protest and Prejudice*. The book helped in fund raising and to fight the back lash against the civil rights movement as a result of the rise of black power and the urban disorders of the late 1960s. In CORE we had some notable successes in combating discrimination in employment. I encountered other civil rights leaders in working for the Kerner Commission (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders) that investigated the disorders⁵ and focused on classifying types of disorder, the interaction between those in the streets and police and post-disorder consequences. I contributed to the report of the Senate Select Committee On Undercover Activities and was involved in various national and international government and other groups concerned with new forms of surveillance and communication.

Lowered Expectations

So quick bright things come to confusion,

Lysander in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

It was incredibly exciting to be at Berkeley and Cambridge during the 1960s. (Marx 2011). But under the somber weight of historical events and knowledge from my studies about revolutions and too many reforms gone bad, the heady optimism of youth was replaced by disillusionment and being happy with small favors. The limits of politics, let alone social science, to bring about rapid, deep lying social change without an avalanche of unwanted consequences became clear. That awareness suggested endless topics for research to find out why the best laid plans so often went awry and reflections on what sociological scholarship could contribute. An edited volume on "muckraking sociology" was an effort to come to terms with the pulls between passion and scholarship and change and various kinds of truth (Marx 1972).

In spite of lowered expectations, I am glad to have been able to apply social science knowledge to public policy and through writing and speaking about racial issues and civil liberties. It is satisfying to have helped secure a seat at the table (even if not at its head)—most recently for privacy and surveillance questions and to have contributed to the national conversation on these issues.

Certainly there is satisfaction in contributing to the empirical and theoretical development of knowledge, and in understanding puzzles, inventing concepts and well-turned phrases, being cited and invited and garnering awards. There is also gratitude. The subsidized opportunities to pursue topics of one's own choosing and to think and write freely is a precious gift.

But research would not offer any Rosetta stone for building the heavenly city upon the hill and the limits and downsides of utopian projections and of the ego become ever more apparent with age. No matter the satisfaction one takes in social research, or how worthwhile you think a given publication is, it is likely to be read by few and little noted, nor long remembered. The star quickly burns out, even if some memory of the flame remains.⁶ In contrast, our training of the ever refreshed and expanding river of students (in particular, those who will become teachers and researchers) has a much broader reach and longer shelf-life because it is self-renewing.

So when the dust settles and the lights dim, what's it all about? What endures? Certainly not the accolades that nourish needy egos and the plaques that tarnish in boxes in a barn. The research grants are expended, articles in journals and the popular press are replaced by the latest issue and books go out of print (and with digitalization our remnants find new homes only in landfills), new social issues and research themes continually appear and displace the old, and the mentors, colleagues, editors, publishers and officials in schools, foundations and government one worked with move on, or out, whether to warm pastures or cold ground.

Perhaps more important and certainly more enduring than the fleeting and quickly forgotten publications, awards and direct encounters with the policy and political worlds are the interactions with students. In reviewing some of my earlier work on sociology as a career in preparation for this article, I was surprised to see how ego-focused much of it was. It was a way to enliven the silent grass growing mood as one moves from “Who’s Who to who’s he”? The writing served to relive (relieve?) the past and as an advertisement for myself for those who missed the 1960s and 1970s.

The writing was mostly about how *I* responded to the opportunities, vicissitudes and successes of a wonderful career, not to mention trying to make sense of failure. For example, in writing about the latter I noted seven characteristics of success (Table 1) and the importance of staying fresh by valuing the process of creating as an end in itself; developing new professional goals and not making your career your life. (Marx 1990). These ideas helped to better manage the unwarranted hubris from success as well as the bitterness from rejection.⁷

Table 1 Seven Characteristics of Success

Brief is the season of Man’s Delight

Pindar- The Pursuit of Excellence

The Greek poet Pindar (c. 518-438BC) in his ode to an Olympic winner notes that a shadow will eventually come to overhang the dream⁸, along with a lot more.

1. It does not last.
2. You can never be successful enough (at least in your own eyes).
3. The more success you have, the harder it becomes to reach the next level of achievement.
4. There is a diminishing-returns effect.
5. Success may have costly and unintended side effects (apart from the price initially paid to achieve it).
6. The correlation between ability, or merit, and success is far from perfect.
7. There is no reason to expect that what you do next will be better, by your own standards, than what you have done in the past or will necessarily bring equivalent or greater recognition and reward

Students

But with this deconstructive warning and call for humility and perspective, I said little about what brought abiding satisfaction, and what today brings the fondest memories, namely teaching and working with students. Given the informal culture of sociology at leading universities, it is easy to slight the importance of, and the personal rewards from, teaching.

I next recall some memorable encounters with students and conclude noting how fulfilling it is to be part of the great progression in which our students pass on to their students what we passed on and have received from our teachers.

In looking back the most satisfying aspect of my career has involved the education of teachers and researchers to whom I communicated the values of the university, the excitement of learning and the flame of Erasmus. I tried to socialize students to the traditions and values of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and civility and to the high ideals of scholarship, freedom of inquiry and critical reflection. I encouraged their curiosity and ability to ask questions about and seek answers to matters that matter.

The enduring contact with my students is a continual source of learning and satisfaction. Letters such as the following are a gift that continues to give, "Your role as teacher, mentor, role model and friend have shaped my life in profound ways--thank you not just for the continuing support today but for over 50 years of support and encouragement. It is a delight that we remain in contact after all these years." Another student wrote, "I can't tell you how much I value the insight and critical thinking your course gave me. It's now a permanent part of my society-apprehending conscience."

Under the best of circumstances, the energy and fresh experiences and thoughts of the more interested students provide a reason to bound into the classroom each morning, particularly if one teaches in a Socratic fashion and makes question raising and learning from students the core of instruction. In the beginning there are the questions and our goal is to provoke wonderment, to cultivate asking "why" and to provide the tools to help with answers.

Beyond the general education offered to undergraduates, I now see how important training future college teachers is. I gave teaching assistants the following statement:

Great that we will be working together! Under the best of circumstances teaching is a calling and not a job. It has a sacred and egalitarian quality. There are not many things in life that can be enriched by being shared, but information is one of them. Among my best memories and experiences are getting students excited about ideas, encouraging them to see things in a new light and helping them develop the habit of asking questions and wondering why, even better the occasional cases where they generate new knowledge. I hope as you carry out your duties that you can be aware of the following:

1. Our greatest impact is likely to be on helping students to think and on generating a scholarly perspective rather than on transmitting facts or fixed answers. Those are quickly forgotten or become dated, but habits of mind endure.
2. Sociology (or social studies as I prefer to call it) mixes scientific and empirical and non-scientific and intuitive elements, quantity and quality, objective measurement and subject experience and meaning. This mixture is our glory, but

it can also be our downfall if we stray too far from one side to the other, or are unaware of what approach we are adopting. While the line often cannot be clearly drawn, make students aware of the (in principle) distinction between facts and values. Know the difference between asking how and asking why and why seeing that difference is so important in our technical age. Develop in your students the ability to think critically and to write clearly in making the case for what they are arguing.

3. learn from your students without falling into the relativistic trap that all answers carry equivalent empirical, logical or moral weight. Be aware of the powerful insights from the sociology of knowledge perspective. Try to involve students in their own learning and get them to take responsibility for it and to take themselves seriously as inquirers. You are not their parents, but are like a more experienced co-worker and a resource. Regardless of whether we pay or are paid, we are all students.
4. share your doubts in the pursuit of knowledge and invite them to be players. The quest for understanding is among the most egalitarian of human endeavors. Encourage them to question you.
5. have high expectations for your students and yourself, but also be honest with them and yourself.⁹
6. continually reflect on how you are doing as a teacher, make use of the many resources available to help you become a better teacher.

I take equal pride in those students who instead of the world of teaching and research chose the world of public affairs—from my first thesis student who was considered a candidate for the Supreme Court, to my last PhD. student who was active in Tiananmen Square and has gone on to become one of the Bill Gateses of China, to the many in-between such as the founder of the National Drug Policy Alliance, the leader of the Police Executive Research Forum and those working in government in elective and civil service positions.

With the occasional contacts over the years, memories of such students stay fresh. Then there are others I lost contact with but observed at a distance. Richard Aoki, the Black Panther mentioned earlier, was a very smart student and I had many discussions with him—we had no disagreements about racial and economic injustice, but many about the best way to bring about social change. In our discussions I encouraged him to continually question his assumptions just as I do mine, and also to look at the empirical base for the beliefs held and to think about the logical structure of an argument. I like to think that our interaction helped guide him toward a successful career in Asian studies and administration, though luck as well may have prevented him from being killed or jailed.

Then there are students such as Vicki who wrote:

“Professor Marx how can I thank you for giving us so much? More than any other professor, you challenged me to think more analytically, to be more objective, and to work harder. But on top of that, you have always been personally warm and receptive, willing to talk, anxious to listen. During my four years at this school I have found very few professors who meet this standard, but that just makes you all the more special.

As I sat in your last lecture, I tried to comprehend not having someone like you to be here encouraging and helping us to think, to question, to learn. I felt very scared and realized the ultimate goal of the best professor is to teach his or her students to do all of those things for themselves. And, I felt better, confident that once I’m “out in the world” all by myself, your lessons will be with me, confident that now I am prepared to think for myself, to question, to wonder. And for that, I thank you” —Vicki

Wow. I’d like to have a teacher like that! But who is Vicki? I have no recollection of her. I have stayed in occasional contact with many of my students. Receiving messages such as “I hold you in the highest regard as a mentor, scholar and human being. You provided encouragement, scholarly guidance and words of wisdom on living the good life” make it worthwhile. To be asked to write introductions to colleagues’ books or to have students dedicate books or articles to you is very meaningful.

In an overflowing cauldron of teaching experiences, among the more memorable was having a student from India introduce himself and say, “Just call me Sid.” His full name was Siddhartha, a name hallowed by 1960s seekers of the way. The occasional unsigned love notes were interesting, as was the careless student who wrote a fine paper on riots that seemed familiar. It should have, as it was taken verbatim from my article in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

One can even wring some wry satisfaction from displeasing a student. Consider the student who gave me a poor grade in the course evaluation because, “he uses far too many big words that get you lost in what he is actually trying to say.” There can even be some satisfaction from students who fail the class. Note the curious case of the student who failed the mid-term and the final and yet wrote a note saying, “Professor Marx, I just wanted to let you know that I really enjoyed your class even though I may not have shown it through my work [sic]. Through the class I have become so much more interested in law and I now know that this is the direction I want to head in... I wanted to thank you for a great class and for helping me find what I really am interested in.” God save the law. What might have been written if the student had received an A grade?

Over the years students I did not work directly with, have kindly thanked me for the impact my writing had on their thinking and careers. A leading scholar of the civil rights movement told me reading *Protest and Prejudice* while working in a factory led him to want to become a scholar.

An Italian student wrote, “Sometimes I think the world is terrible. I see corruption. I see cynicism and people without solidarity. Then I met people like you and I come back to smile because you give us hope. I feel myself stronger than before because

I see that another world is possible. What can I do it is Italy? But I will try not to change my mind about my moral integrity."

A letter from Rebel, an articulate outlaw biker:

"Dear Professor Marx: I usually detest sociologists. About a year and a half ago, I was very tempted to stomp xxx (author of a book about Viet Nam veterans)... But I want to tell you, even though you are a sociologist, how much I appreciate your work. I promise you, I pose no threat to you at all. I am just appreciative and excited. Thank you very much. You now have a new fan. Rebel." (maybe he could help me with the critics!)

In spite of the hierarchical nature of the relationships, students can also be colleagues. Fundamental to the sociological sensibility with its attention to roles, subjectivity and personhood is taking the role of the other and being a good listener. Engaging students' ideas and writing can aide one's own work. As Anna in *The King and I* sang, "if you become a teacher, by your students you will be taught."

The individual must go to bat alone as C.W. Mills (2001) observed. Yet the batter is also a member of a team and that team nestles within a broader series of overlapping communities. As ET said, "we are not alone." Students often overflow with the raw materials for an article, but need to be encouraged to believe in themselves and to learn the craft of asking questions and converting ideas into publishable form.

Like baby birds, they require nurturing and protection, but shouldn't stay in the nest too long. It is important to support and complement (as both supplementing and praising) one's students—but this must be toward the end of setting them free to follow their own path, not replicating yourself.¹⁰ I am very proud of having written papers with so many of my students over the years (in most cases this was the student's first published paper and we did only one together.)

Students can be the vital vacuum pulling us from the powerful isolating forces of solipsism and they are the conduit through which we learn to speak to broader public audiences. In addition, we need allies and torch bearers. Cream might rise to the top if it's not in the freezer, but academic reputations and opportunities require supporters and networks. Given the reciprocal nature of much interaction there can be more direct payback. Those in subordinate positions we encounter today may later be in positions to help (or harm) us tomorrow. Graduate students seem so young and jejune when first encountered (and that intensifies as one ages) that it is hard to remember that pretty soon they will be on editorial, hiring, grant-giving and award committees to which, in a role reversal, you may come to (or be offered), as a humble supplicant.

In Gratitude

Vita mutatur, non tollitur

Latin Rite Mass

Georg Simmel has written of "irredeemable gratitude" --for example what one may feel toward a special mentor. I recall on the shock of the 2016 election wondering "what would the late S.M. Lipset say?" And with little reflection, I immediately knew much of what he would have said and drafted some thoughts drawing from his lessons. What a gift to take another's intellectually and morally powerful sensibilities and insights into one's own being and to filter them through one's own experiences. The same applies to my debt to Erving Goffman in the face of new forms of communication and surveillance for self and organizational presentations and to Neil Smelser for his grace, communalism, intellectual breadth and systematic approach. Awareness that such gifts cannot be directly reciprocated, deepens the indebtedness. Yet reciprocation is possible by doing for others what was done to us by passing on the values, sentiments, style, method and substance of what we were given. The giver may gain solace in knowing that what he or she offers is a gift that keeps on giving, as links are added to the chain. ¹¹

Students both in class and when they become colleagues sometimes thank their teachers, the reverse is less common. Yet basic role analysis will show the dependence of teachers on their students and the gratitude we owe them. They offer not only a captive audience but, in a curious economic reversal, they don't require payment for what we receive from them.

Wordsworth tells us that we should not grieve for the splendor in the grass, nor for the glory of the flower, but rather seek strength in what remains behind. Yet we can also gain strength in what lies *ahead* that we will never know.

When Ruben Rumbaut of the University of California Irvine (who I had contact with when he was a student in Boston) asked his mentor, the late Egon Bittner, "how can I ever repay you?" Egon gave a wry look and said in his understated way, "in the great chain of being, one day it will be your turn." And so it is and will be. As Henry James observed, "we work in the dark. We do what we can. We give what we have."

Egon was correct. If we are fortunate it will be our turn. I saw that with respect to the article on "37 moral mandates for Aspiring Sociologists" written for graduate students. Marx (1997) Ruben wrote that he found the article "such a refreshing antidote to so much of academic sociology and of the "training" of graduate students that ever since I've made a practice of sending it with a personal note to all the students of every seminar I've taught. I've also sent it to colleagues and former students who went on to become sociologists and noticed subsequently that some of them even included it in their syllabi to *their* students. (Nobody ever keeps a citation count for that but it matters more.) ... In front of my computer I have a handcrafted sign on a 3 x 5 white card with this personal motto: ASPIRE TO INSPIRE BEFORE YOU EXPIRE. I'm looking at it now. Every time I send out your 37 moral imperatives, I think I'm living up to the spirit of those six words."

In validation, USC Professor Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo, one of Ruben's students decades ago, graciously wrote, "Thank you for your moral imperatives. I teach a 2 semester grad seminar on participant observation and interviewing at USC, and I always use that article from *The American Sociologist*. It helps students, and it inspires me every time." I like to think that some of her students now teaching are passing on the ideas to their students. Among my proudest moments were learning that two of my best students received awards for their role in mentoring *their* students. As with Mr Holland (*Mr. Holland's Opus*), we who were chosen to carry the baton need receptive hands to pass it on to in the unending race. Contrary to Don McLean's song ("American Pie"), the music need never die, at least in our backward and forward musings about a teaching career.

As teachers we are rewarded in knowing that through our students and their students *ad infinitum* some of what we give seeps into the culture and geometrically trickles across generations --whether in direct interaction or to those we don't know who encounter our work.

I am grateful to my teachers (and their teachers) and to those I have taught and worked with over the last 50 years for their complicity in the great chain of being that involves the delivery, receipt and transmission of knowledge. Knowledge, unlike other forms of wealth, is enriched as it is shared and exchanged.

As with The Dude in the film *The Big Lebowski*, the giving of ideas abides—that is our satisfaction and our solace, our sustenance and perhaps even our salvation, so thanks to all of my students and to theirs and to theirs

Finally, in retirement sociology has continued to impact my life in the effort to understand what's it all about. The engagement of the imagination is a wondrous gift and wisdom is indeed more precious than rubies (Proverbs 3:15) I am very appreciative of the values, questions and world views my profession has offered. Now there is greater time to reflect, and for family, recreation, consumption and citizenship activities. I am thankful for the indulgence of imagination and the faded memory-maps.¹² of biography and place as these involved the quest for a life lived with truth, integrity, love, civility, beauty, humor, fun and the continuing challenges of discovery. As Michelangelo is reputed to have said late in his life, *ancora imparo* (I continue to learn). With Tennyson's *Ulysses*, it is better to burnish in use (even if somewhat dulled) than to rust through inactivity -- "though much has been taken much abides" and "some work of noble note, may yet be done".

For colleagues approaching retirement my advice (perhaps trite but certainly right) is — be in the moment. Don't put off things you have wanted to do. 'Let it be' as the Beatles sang—both your expectations for, and your anger at others; be appreciative of all that has been, and continues to be, good in your life and in life; don't let hard times and dusty roads result in settling for too little, but neither set the bar so high that the quest for the ideal prevents accepting the good enough; stay active within your physical limits; stay *engage a la Sartre* (and occasionally *enrage*) with whatever moves you and doesn't

hurt others; keep the faith and the passion; come to terms with the transitory nature of recognition and success and see their accidental and environmental correlates; try and merge means and ends; appreciate dualities, polarities and ironies and the fascinating elements of the individual and the social in which individuals die, but the culture that nourished them and that they contributed to lives on; share the knowledge and finally, stay curious and be filled with wonderment and laughter. The affecting, coming of age film *Boyhood* ends, as the actress, looking back on her life says, "I just thought there would be more." I beg to differ, but (as Peggy Lee sang), "If that's all there is my friends. Then let's keep dancing."

Bibliography

Anwar, Y. "The Late Robert Bellah's Philosophy of Death",
<http://news.berkeley.edu/2013/08/01-bellah-on-death/>

Levine, M. *The Triangle of Death*. 1996 Delacorte Press.

Marx, G.T. . *Muckracking Sociology: Research as Social Criticism*. Piscataway, NJ:
Transaction Publishers, 1972.

---"[Reflections On Academic Success And Failure: Making It, Forsaking It, Reshaping It](#)", *Authors of Their Own Lives*, B. Berger, ed., Berkeley: Univ. of California Press. 1990

---"[Of Methods and Manners for Aspiring Sociologists: 37 Moral Imperatives](#)
American Sociologist, Spring 1997.

---"[Hither and Thither No More: Reflections of a Retiring, But Not Shy, Professor](#)",
C. Powell, ed, *Critical Voices in Criminology*, 2009.

---"Reflections on being at Berkeley in the 1960s "[From Conservative and Optimistic to Reactionary, Counter-Revolutionary and Pessimistic: Sociology and Society in the 1960s](#)" Paper delivered to the [Pacific Sociological Association](#). Seattle, March 2011A.

---"[In Gratitude: The Right Chemistry, Timing, Place and Organization](#)" Remarks prepared for the occasion of accepting the Lifetime Achievement Award from [The Society for the Study of Social Problems](#), Las Vegas, Nevada 2011 B

---. "'Your Papers Please': Personal and Professional Encounters with Surveillance." *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies*, Kirstie Ball, Kevin Haggerty, and David Lyon, eds., xx–xxxii. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Mills, C.W. *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press. 2001.

Shellow, R. Boesel, D., Marx, G. and Sears, D. *The Harvest of Racism*. Univ. of Michigan Press, forthcoming.

Simmel, G. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*.

Twain, M. *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed., H.E. Smith, Berkeley: University of California Press. 2010

Notes

¹ On contemplating his future after returning from Great Britain, ambassador John Adams reputedly said to his revolutionary compatriot Charles Thomas: "I have been rollin like a stone for 30 years, Never three years in the same place. I intend to lay fast to my farm. Here to live, here to die. Here to lay my bones." Thomas wanting Adams to run for president replied, No, you were not meant to sit in the shade of life." (TV mini-series John Adams, 2008) And becoming president soon after, he clearly was not.

² These and other personal reflections are at: <http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/neil.html>

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/sssp.html> (more on Berkeley in the 60s and on mentoring)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/survhandbook.html>" (on encounters with and studying surveillance)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/hitherthither.html> (retirement and looking back)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/china.html> (sociology and travel)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/geis.html> (academic careers)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/37moral.html> (advice to graduate students)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/ascervg.html> (on Erving Goffman)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/neil.html> (on Neil Smelser)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/smelser.html> (on Neil Smelser)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/lipset.html> (on S.M. Lipset)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/minmov.html> (civil rights movement)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/success.html> (success and failure)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/ascmuck.html> (muckraking sociology)

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/dirty.html> (dirty data methods)

³ I was aware of withholding information early in life at the age of 6 when, (according to my baby book) I said, "I know 2 and 2 is 4. I don't need to tell the teacher." That was a precursor of an attitude that would later help and hinder.

⁴ Mark Twain wrote, "What a wee little part of a person's life are his acts and his words...[they] are so trifling a part of his bulk! A mere skin enveloping... the mass of him is hidden. Biographies are but the clothes and buttons of the man." (Smith 2010)

On the other hand there is also a strain toward honesty as a result of conscience and the fear of being revealed a liar. Perhaps the best the reader can hope for is Jack Nicholson's statement in the film *Something's Gotta Give*: "I mostly told you the truth."

⁵ It was exciting to work for the Commission. A document we drafted on *The Harvest of Racism* likely helped push the commission to take a stronger position with respect to the role of racism in the disorders and in American society. The Commission stated, "white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." The report of the National Advisory Commission was the most significant and far-reaching statement of a programmatic nature ever made by a governmental unit on American race relations. It was a major call for new will and resources and a reordering of national priorities.

<http://web.mit.edu/gtmarx/www/kerner.html>

Fifty years after its suppression *Harvest* it will finally be published (Shellow, *et al.* , forthcoming).

⁶ This temporal evisceration is nicely captured by a wise Sensei, "if you ever want to understand just how necessary each of us really is in this life, just stick your finger in a bucket of water, pull it out and watch how fast the hole fills." (in Levine 1996).

⁷ For example, today I smile at the anger I initially felt in a job rejection letter that said, "you were very high on our long short list" or a rebuff of an article, "Unfortunately there is no room in our editorial agenda for your work."

Being playful also helps. Thus, in the acknowledgment to my surveillance book I wrote, "there are times when the search for support from well-known organizations was not successful (names not mentioned to protect their privacy). I know how many qualified applicants there were relative to resources, since the e-mail rejection letters I received

were informative on that point. I wish these organizations well in their funding endeavors and am sorry we didn't have the chance to work together this time. But be of good cheer and perhaps we can work together some other time."

⁸ In this ode to an Olympic winner:

" He who wins, of a sudden, some noble prize
In the rich years of youth
Is raised high with hope; his manhood takes wings;
He has in his heart what is better than wealth.
But brief is the season of man's delight.

Soon it falls to the ground;
Some dire decision uproots it.
--Thing of a day! Such is man: a shadow in a dream.
Yet when god-given splendour visit him
A bright radiance plays over him, and how sweet is life!"

⁹ This is difficult when just beginning. As is common with new graduate students, in the fall of 1960 as school began, I was not at all sure that I would be successful in graduate school at Berkeley, let alone in a career that might follow. The self-confident and learned demeanor I saw in fellow first year grad students from eastern private schools was intimidating, as were the heavy brief cases they carried. I had a tattered green book bag. My uncertainty about graduate study was increased by an orientation meeting in which new students were told "next year at this time half of you won't be here."

Fortunately it was six years later before I saw the following evaluation from Kenneth Bock, my first semester history of social theory teacher: "This is a very marginal student. I would be surprised if he receives a master's degree. He certainly will not receive a PhD." I did not see that until I was on the Berkeley faculty and dipped into my file one Sunday evening—something that is now legal to do, but might not have been then. That letter was balanced by a positive evaluation from my instructors in the required methods course. It gave me pause in initially judging students and made clear the need for multiple measures.

¹⁰ Neil Smelser was a model for me in doing this. He has worked with more PhDs than anyone I know. Yet there is no Smelser school of sociology—rather there are many independent scholars sharing in the ethos, craft and way of being a scholar that he provided. He passed away in 2017. I tried to capture what he meant to me and to so many others

¹¹ The late sociologist Robert Bellah, in reflecting on origins and leavings, writes that he "...had within me the earliest beginnings of the components of a billion or more years of life, the genes that I share with worms (a lot) and with mold (some) and the atoms that I share with the universe all the way back to the big bang. So returning to all that isn't so bad. Further, I will join the company of saints, of all those whose cultural work has made it possible for me to have been a half-way decent person, and what I have added to the

cultural pool, even when I am long forgotten, will go on having an influence (unless we become extinct soon, which is also possible) for a long, perhaps an immeasurable time.” (Anwar 2015).

¹² When we are among the fortunate, such recall work is a bonus (all the more so given the tendency to selectively remember the good and minimize the bad). As Robert Louis Stevenson observed in “De M. Antonio”, memory can be doubly sweet:

“Now Antonius, in a smiling age,
To him remembering not one day is sad,
Not one but that its memory makes him glad,
So good men lengthen life; and to recall
The past is to have twice enjoyed it all.”