

Searching for the “white crow”: Stories of hockey, fishing and lessons learned chasing “Bigfoot” from the perspectives of an academic greenhorn

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Abstract: Adapted from a keynote address presented to Master’s and Doctoral students in Atlantic Canada in 2014, the author recalls his own experiences as a graduate student in Alberta. In his message, he reflects on events and stories he heard, which brought balance to his life and motivated him to continue in his doctoral quest. Using the metaphor of “chasing Bigfoot” and Gaarder’s (1996) “white crow,” the author encourages graduate students to persist in their studies and grow resilience to overcome the challenges and barriers that are often present in academic graduate programs.

Keywords: Social Justice, Graduate Students, Social Phenomena, Mythology, Perseverance

Preamble

This keynote address was read at the Atlantic Education Graduate Student Conference (AEGSC) in Fredericton, New Brunswick on July 5, 2014. The presenter, an assistant professor at the time, was invited to provide his insights for graduate student delegates based on his doctoral experiences at the University of Calgary from 2005 to 2009. Of interest, the talk was given at 10:00 a.m., just one hour before the university, and subsequently the conference, was cancelled due to the approach of Hurricane Arthur, which hit the city and region causing extensive damage. In fact, the author had to give the talk in the dark using his cell-phone light.

Introduction

Good morning graduate students, university colleagues, family members, and friends. I would like to thank the Atlantic Education Graduate Student Conference organizing committee for extending me this invitation. It is an honour to be granted a few moments to share some stories with you this morning, especially since I am not far removed from what many of you may be experiencing, striving towards, and perhaps already revealing in your graduate research and writing. I sincerely hope you are finding your educational journey as rewarding as I found mine.

Although I may primarily serve in Educational Administration and Leadership at the University of New Brunswick, I am an English Literature and Humanities teacher to the core. I am a storyteller. I love to listen to tales and spin my own. When I tell my stories to the students I am working with, I hope, first and foremost, that I am entertaining them as much as I am teaching them. The three short tales I have to share in this keynote address are for those of you on your graduate journey who may be battling doubt and uncertainty; I want to help you confirm that this graduate voyage you have undertaken is important and meaningful. If I can add to the encouragement you are already accumulating as you approach the completion of your Master’s or Doctoral program, then I will feel good having written these stories down—Allow doubt to be your friendly companion; without doubt as our friend, we may not dream deeply enough about what is possible in life.

If you are on the pathway to a master’s or doctoral degree, then you are an educational dreamer and anything is possible. That is part of our shared identities. I spend considerable time in my daily experiences reflecting on possibilities for education and in life. I do not apologize for doing this.

Hockey, Fishing, and “Chasing Bigfoot”

I have chosen topics that continue to fascinate me to illuminate the educational themes in my stories. Admittedly, I once worried when one of my journalist colleagues suggested to me that I was becoming a “jack of all trades, and a master of none.” That is a consequence of dreaming. But that was 28 years ago, and since then, I have learned through many of my personal and professional encounters that an individual who strives hard in their life may encounter many paths, realize many dreams, and enjoy many opportunities. I

always encourage my students to set many goals, have many dreams, and remain hopeful on their quests through life.

I have found that people may control some of their adventures. I have also found that some adventures cannot be controlled. Many adventures confront and claim the adventurer. We all have one journey on this planet—to embrace our adventures, create stories, and, hopefully, make a difference, as well as contribute to the lives of those people we serve. As graduate researchers, you may be resting on the shoulders of philosophers and educational theorists whom you read, but as you align your thinking with theirs, it is equally important to grow your own voice and establish room for your own ideas in the educational conversations that you wish to be part of. Parker Palmer (2007) once said, “we teach who we are” (p. 1); our research also suggests who we are.

I draw strength and inspiration from many people, many places, and many stories. One particular story, with social justice overtones, has stayed in my mind since it was taught to me by one of my teachers in junior high school—a story that I subsequently taught to hundreds of my own students in my English courses over the duration of my public school service. The idea is expressed in words by a character in a short novel called *Jean Val Jean* (1935/1989). Some of you may know this story as the shorter adaptation of *Les Misérables* (1862/1964) by Victor Hugo.

Briefly, in this story, after serving 19 years in prison for stealing bread to feed his sister’s hungry children—in addition to several escape attempts—Jean Val Jean is released. Prison life has changed him, but not for the better. He finds himself marginalized in society until he meets a forgiving and understanding individual. Changed by this chance encounter, he gains confidence, assumes a new identity, and over the course of many years, Jean develops a small industry that allows him to employ hundreds of people and contribute to their livelihoods. He is portrayed as an effective but quiet leader.

One day, he is approached by a community member who suggests that Jean should allow his name to stand as a candidate for the mayor of their city. Jean is not interested in this type of service for several reasons. One reason, we can infer, is that he will risk having his former unsavory prison life revealed and opened up for debate and scrutiny, even though he is no longer a criminal. Another reason, which my junior high students offered when I taught them this story, was that Jean was a quiet and shy humanitarian who simply wished to be left alone and serve the workers in his factory.

When Jean rejects the request a third time, the community member presses on with a question and asks him: “Isn’t it wrong not to do all the good you can in your life?” (Cleaver, 1989, p. 43). This question shakes his world and creates discomfort. His workers and their children and families need his leadership; the citizens of the community also need his service. There is risk involved for Jean Val Jean, but he soon realizes that the woman is right. He starts to believe that it is wrong to not do all the good he can in his life, and so he accepts her invitation and becomes the elected Mayor of the city. The rest of the story paints the evolution of Jean quietly performing social justice work among his constituents.

And that is my invitation and challenge for you this morning, as Hurricane Arthur makes its way toward us and fills us with uncertainty and anxiety. Though university graduate work is busy, especially when it is juggled with many other personal and professional responsibilities, when students encounter new ideas in educational literature, form new relationships, and actively debate ideas with colleagues in courses and over coffee, they are changed forever. The process of reflection and action (Freire, 1970) takes over, and graduate work provides opportunities for students to engage in constant reflection on their lives, their beliefs, their values, their missions, the wisdom that they brought with them into their program, how they obtained that wisdom, and, especially, if that wisdom is still relevant for them.

When my wife Lauren and I arrived in Fredericton last August, University of New Brunswick Professor Alan Sears mused at our quick and total departure from our personal and professional lives in Western Canada. I would like to believe that we are cautiously adventurous. But I am not sure anymore nor do I really care about this any longer. We left safe, permanent, and meaningful employment in Alberta; we left family members, even young grandchildren, to travel to the other side of Canada in a nearly broken-down Dodge Dakota with an older Bigfoot camper overloading the truck box.

I was fortunate to be mentored and coached by excellent professors and teachers through my graduate work, and now, this past year, from Dr. Sears and several faculty members at UNB. I listened carefully to their advice and wisdom. When I was suffering anxieties in my doctoral program a few years ago related to the uncertainty of work and availability of jobs in the area, my supervisor, Dr. Tim Goddard, told me to settle down. He said:

Lyle, you do not know where you are going to end up after all of this and it's okay. There are multiple opportunities you can't see right now, where you will be able to perform educational service. It just might not be here. (J. T. Goddard, personal communication, 2007)

He was correct. For me, having made the decision to enter graduate work in education, there was no going back to the safe and secure life I once thought existed. Since that conversation, the fear that I now live with each day is more aligned with missed opportunities and living to an age where I regret daily that I did not have the courage to try them.

Education and schooling can be shaky, unstable, and fraught with conflict and struggle, politics and power, and, ultimately, embedded in landscapes that are always changing. Everywhere. I encourage you to embrace this uncertainty and the constant and noticeable change in every facet of education. Embrace it, and you will never run out of topics that demand your attention and inquiry into areas that need your increasing skill and wisdom. Like many others before you, you may have to move to do your work, and, as I have found, Kijiji has loads of trucks and campers for sale.

Hockey

I am originally from Flin Flon, Manitoba, which would have been the city officially stamped on my birth certificate had my parents not stopped in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan to visit my grandparents a week before I was born. My father was becoming a teacher, and my mother was soon to carry on her profession in journalism for the newspaper. Flin Flon was, and still remains, a mining city on the edge of the Canadian Shield, surrounded by wilderness much like you would encounter here in Atlantic and Eastern Canada. The deep, dark pine forests wrapped around lakes and rivers are beautiful, inviting, and terrifying.

In my time in the classroom I have listened to and witnessed students by the hundreds gripe about their hometowns and leave the trees, homes, and avenues of their youth in search of opportunity elsewhere. Certainly hometowns can be brutal for many children, and escaping from them for someplace else—to grow and become the person they imagine they can be—is neither a new story nor even a bad one. Still, the place where you are from is equally important as the place you are at. And try as some may to forget those early settings, those environments frame and shape a person's core identity in ways that are not easy to discern or even easy to describe. Identity is, as Palmer suggested, “an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute life converge in the mystery of self” (2007, p. 13).

I believe this, and my experience as an educator and educational researcher, has provided me industrious time to think, reflect on, and try to understand events that occurred early in my life; the people I shared those events with, and what all the mysteries may mean for me in becoming, or trying to become, the person I am working hard to be. This may be part of your story, too.

For instance, in Flin Flon, I was introduced to the game of hockey very early, and my engagement with it as a spectator, player, and coach has contributed to my pedagogy and my ways of being. Some of this has been good; some of this I am trying to unlearn.

I was told by my father that it was not the actual game that captivated me at first. It was the playing of the Canadian national anthem: the lights turned down, a spotlight shining over my head onto the huge portrait of a young Queen Elizabeth moments before the puck was dropped to start a Flin Flon Bomber hockey game against one of their opponents from another city in Western Canada. Though contested in this day and age, the Bomber name honoured the many copper, zinc, and gold miners, and Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting employees—men and women—who sank two kilometers each day into the earth to set their charges of dynamite into the rock. This would begin the process of crushing, burning, leaching, and casting precious

metals into solid forms that either directly, or in our case, indirectly, allowed community members to construct their Northern lives and identities.

Like Quebec author Roch Carrier's young boy in his famous story *The Hockey Sweater* (1979), we too had our heroes whom we admired in the National Hockey League (NHL); watched on fuzzy black and white televisions, and emulated on outside rinks. And because my father was a teacher, we had access to our school after hours, and he would take my sister, brother, and me into the gymnasium often; the one thing we wanted to do most was to simply shut the lights off and sing *O Canada* in the darkness, in the centre of the gymnasium. In later years, I played for the Bombers and became part of that enduring Flin Flon hockey culture, crafting an identity along the way through hard work, grit, perseverance, and resilience. These were some of the qualities that helped me sustain my efforts during my graduate studies.

Older now, I am constantly engaged in connecting the fragments of *lived experiences* (van Manen, 1997) into meaningful themes for analysis. For instance, a few years ago, I was invited by some colleagues for coffee at a local restaurant in the city where I was teaching to share some of the findings and recommendations from the doctoral research I had completed. The two individuals I met with shared with me their experiences of poverty, famine, and war in their home countries, which they had fled. They openly shared stories of horror and the suffering of their families and children that I could not even begin to imagine nor feel equipped and educated enough to effectively respond to. Their stories went beyond the digital images and print media I was accustomed to in Canada, and they trusted me enough in that moment to share them with me. Writers who describe narrative, ethnographic, and case study research talk about the importance of establishing trust through reciprocity (Carspecken, 1996; Creswell, 1998; Lather, 1986). In my mind, the benefit of this is that once trust is established, friendships may follow between researcher and participant, especially in a small city where, as educator and researcher, one tends to encounter his/her participants often and everywhere.

This Saturday morning encounter gradually moved us into other conversations beyond my research and their interest in it. My new colleagues in the coffee shop knew that I was a local hockey coach, and they wanted to learn more about the Canadian game. More importantly, they were interested in sharing their own stories of a similar game they played on the streets and fields of Sudan and Nigeria. They remembered and described their stories with passion equal to mine; they recalled their friends, coaches, and teammates; they remembered their first goals, and their championships, and their parents cheering them on. Like me, they remembered the exhilaration of being part of something that was beyond their youthful comprehension as they were living it and experiencing it. And be damned if they were going to have all that had become toxic and dangerous in their lives contaminate the treasured memories of their youth—those energizing memories and stories, which they had secured in their minds, those stories that they owned and brought with them on their uncertain journey into a not so welcoming environment where they had chosen to begin to reinvent themselves and “to be” again.

It was our discussion of common youth experiences in these sport-related activities, our early childhood friendships, and the generation of positive energy amidst chaos that we were honoring—that bound us in further dialogue and sealed our relationship with each other (Freire, 1970). They described the effort and hard work they produced in the activities they had played as youth and drove them to succeed later in life. Both of them believed that their willingness to collaborate, to problem solve, to endure pain and suffering—both physical and psychological—with their teammates and friends, on and off the fields, were core qualities, which helped them contribute to and save the lives of many of their family members and friends as well as their own on their journey to Canada.

I continue to listen to and enjoy the amazing stories of graduate students as they begin their own process of personal and academic transformation. It does not matter if you are beginning your graduate program or completing it, or finishing one to start another. I am confident that your stories of joy, of pain and suffering, of hope, of victory and defeat are guiding you along quite well. Hold tight to your stories and be thankful for them, because they may give you much needed strength that will help sustain you in your quest to do more in your graduate program, view more in life, and potentially contribute to the betterment of more lives around you. In Kipling (1910) fashion, your stories may help you to “hold on when there is nothing in you, except the will which says to them: ‘Hold on!’”

Fishing

I said that my hometown of Flin Flon is near many lakes and rivers, much like many regions in Atlantic and Eastern Canada. As youth, if we were not playing hockey, we were fishing or attempting to bridge both activities. For instance, during winter my brother and I, along with many of our friends, would ice fish for trout and walleye and play hockey at the same time. We would take our skates, sticks, and shovels out onto frozen lakes, clear off a rink, cut our holes, and carve a path from the ice we had shoveled to the hole we had cut where we had our line and hook set up. It was a tough decision when you had a breakaway and a fish on your line at the same time.

What fishing was to me in my youth certainly became more meaningful to me when I was a graduate student: for my health, my mental well-being, and helping maintain some balance. There were times during those years when I was simply lost in educational theory, philosophy, data management, and deadlines, and fishing was my salvation.

In 2009, our daughter married her husband on the shores of the lake near our summertime cabin. One of my daughter's requests was for me to provide boat rides for our guests to explore the rocky shores of the Canadian Shield. During one of the wedding boat rides, I came down with a bad case of hiccups while playing host, driver, and guide at the same time. I did not notice I was a few metres off the safe course of travel. I was cautiously watching the depth finder, but also turning my head to converse with the people in our boat; my wife, who served as the boat's navigator, was back at the cabin attending to our other guests. Immediately, 30 feet of water below the boat became 20, then 16, then 6, then 3, and I pulled back the throttle to stop just in time and avoided a catastrophe. The boat loudly clawed its path across the face of a hidden limestone reef that was two and a half feet below the surface, jolting all my passengers, some to the floor. As I embarrassedly turned around and surveyed the rock, I was fascinated that it was not a marked reef and thankful that no one was injured.

I went back to the rock that day and found it again and mapped it out on my GPS. Upon closer investigation, another discovery confronted and intrigued me. This hidden rock posed unimaginable dangers to those who did not know that body of water. As I studied the reef more closely, I hypothesized that the structure and color of the rock, its location from the shore, the vegetation surrounding it, and the depth on all sides made it home to hundreds of fish. Our family has now confirmed this. Indeed, this rock damaged my boat (or, I damaged my boat because I drove over this rock), but fortunately, it did not injure my passengers or me the day after the wedding. Instead, that rock allowed our family to create many more memories and stories in the years after.

Moving forward cautiously, I have taken many lessons from this particular boating experience. One memory has constantly served as a symbolic reminder of the findings that may be discovered where they are not expected to be found, at moments when one least expects to find them. This is especially true and important in educational research. Sometimes the best stories, the most important narratives, exist in the most dangerous places, and a careful researcher may only get to those stories when they find themselves a little off their charted course of action and educational adventure.

In educational research, many important stories are not shared or are not shared fully and completely, unless the investigator goes a little off course and finds him or herself slightly off track; sometimes in an uncomfortable area that presents risks of various kinds. Pay particular and close attention to these moments when you are in the research process. For instance, researchers who find themselves off track and continue to mine their data may find important gems that they did not see at first. In those gems, there may be stories of great importance for you to share with your readers.

Chasing your "Bigfoot"

Delegates, I have read through the abstracts of your presentations to learn as much as I can about the ideas you have shaped into your papers, presentations, and research projects, which you will begin to share shortly during this conference. I am impressed with your work. Metaphorically, I can clearly see that your "Bigfoots" are worthy of your time to chase them. I am also interested in the questions you are asking and of the events

in your life that have shaped you and driven you to ask these questions. I am interested in what is inspiring your curiosity to perform research, to write papers, and to lead conference sessions. I seek to place your ideas into ongoing educational conversations for debate and scrutiny where you will place yourselves in risky situations and stand and say: “My ideas are big, and I want them to be considered seriously, because I believe my findings, and thoughts about them, will enhance lives and force positive change somewhere in our world.”

I want to encourage you, if you do not already, to believe that your work—your research—is the most important research in your field. I am not suggesting that you stand abruptly and tell everyone this, but I am encouraging you to believe this in your heart, mind, and soul. Your work is the most important work being conducted in your faculty right now, and it will enhance and change lives for the better.

I believe graduate students have to believe this. You cannot believe anything but this. You deserve this. Your participants deserve this. And the people you work with and those whom you serve deserve no less than this. Yes, bold thoughts generate added pressure. However, I fear that if you do not believe this before, during and long after you have completed your research and program, your commitment may wane in time when you need energy the most, especially when you are disseminating your research. And there will be a time where you will need energy to generate more energy simply to carry on.

Also, try not to dwell on the early things you write to gain clarity on your journey. This final part is a piece I wrote and shared in my doctoral seminar 10 years ago to help me sort out some confusion at that time, to play with some ideas and, of course, to have fun with idea, text, and debate. It begins as such:

Friday, October 14, 2005

Social phenomena and physical phenomena—are they the same, different, or interrelated? How do they exist? What can people know about social phenomena? Let’s start with a lighter topic—Bigfoot. The tabloids and even some more reputable papers and news sources regularly publish copy or announce the mysterious creature’s whereabouts, size, smell, and terrifying screams. If a person surfs the Internet and YouTube, they will find thousands of sites dedicated to this creature; also known in Canada as Sasquatch.

As a young boy, I wouldn’t walk in the nearby forest without my dad, because I learned to read by reading books on the subject. What’s most curious to me now, as I attempt to extend my understanding of social phenomena, is that I wasn’t concerned about the forest before the age of eight. Our family routine of getting up and ready for school coincided with listening to CBC radio. My dad was a teacher in our community school, and my mother worked at the local newspaper. It was little wonder that I was first a journalist and then a teacher.

One morning, CBC radio reported that an eight-foot Sasquatch had been spotted by a Manitoba conservation officer 10 miles north of The Pas, Manitoba; about 80 miles south of where we lived in Flin Flon. I made the mistake of asking my dad, (an English teacher and dreamer), “What’s a Sasquatch?” His reply, though forced in parental humor, sent my imagination on a Don Quixotic quest, while at the same time limiting my expanding northern playground. I simply would not walk through the forest anymore on the short route to school after my father’s description of the creature.

The image of Bigfoot in my mind even affected my newspaper route. Neighbours who lived near dense forested areas would not get their newspapers in the wintertime, because it was dark before I could get to their houses, and there were no streetlights on my route at the time. As a consequence, my dad had to deal with my angry customers when they phoned our house wondering about their newspaper. What is further intriguing upon this renewed reflection is that I spent many hours reading books on Bigfoot from the Flin Flon Public Library as well as what my school library could offer, which, paradoxically, only served to make me even more frightened. I simply could not resist my curiosity on the subject, no matter how much the frightening imagery possessed me.

Now I am only hoping I can bring this cognitive manoeuvre around to fit into this narrative, but I am not confident I can. But it is going to stay in nonetheless, because it is stirring such grand memories. As a physical phenomenon to be studied by human sensory attributes, perhaps even cut

open by Aristotle himself who “got down on all fours and studied frogs and fish, anemones and poppies” (Gaarder, 1996, p. 106), Bigfoot doesn’t make sense in a world constructed and maintained by the ideas connected to the revolutionary technological advances and social order of the past 200 years. But the idea of Bigfoot exists. Physically, the creature doesn’t have to exist, because it exists in the minds of many people—people like René Dahinden and John Green who spent much of their adult lives on the quest to prove that the creature did exist. Dreamers like Lyle Hamm, whose behaviour and childhood activities were shaped by the idea of a creature lurking in the woods nearby. The phenomena thus has social implications in the degree that many people truly believe in such a phenomenon that they are willing to take on criticism and ridicule for that one chance that Bigfoot becomes what Gaarder described as the “white crow” (1996, p. 470): a possibility. Does one simply stop looking for something because science boldly claims it doesn’t exist and can’t exist? I hope not.

There does not seem to be clear physical evidence on the Sasquatch in way of body or bones, yet millions of people know about the idea of Sasquatch or creature resembling a Sasquatch (i.e., The Yeti in the Himalayas). They don’t need to necessarily believe in the myth.

But here’s an interesting story. A ferry operator on the Nelson River near Norway House, Manitoba, claims to have spotted a three metre hairy creature (CBC.ca, 2005). The operator was able to attain two minutes and forty-nine seconds of the encounter on a video camera. After allowing several relatives and community members to view the video, he sold the rights to *A Current Affair* on the Fox Television Network and made a lot of money. Does this video evidence produce a physical phenomenon, or is the real phenomena a social fact in that the topic can produce a social stir? It can be argued either way as an unusual and significant occurrence. Another phenomenon is that people watch sensational news broadcasts in search of their truths. I recall a recent documentary where a Bigfoot researcher made an illuminating point. He stated that even if a Bigfoot creature was caught and dragged from one circus to the next, poked and prodded, cut open and explored, there would still be people suggesting it could not be real—that it just could not exist.

Whatever one believes, what may be important is to uphold the mythology of the Sasquatch or Bigfoot—a mythology embedded deeply in the traditions and stories of many peoples across North America and around the world. It could be the “white crow” and, as Gaarder (1996) pointed out, “all true philosophers should keep their eyes open. Even if we have never seen a white crow, we should never stop looking for it” (p. 470).

And so I encourage you to keep searching for your “white crow” whatever your topic of study might be. I have spoken to many students in the audience, who, like members in my doctoral cohort in Calgary, were intercepting statistics about those who begin in graduate studies and do not finish their program. If this thought enters your mind, dismiss is quickly.

Admittedly, a graduate program may be daunting. The preparation, sacrifice, and work that goes into producing a thesis, a dissertation, or the last sentence in that last course in your program may seem a lot like chasing a mythological creature through a Canadian wilderness.

But if it is work that has to be completed by you for you to perform all the good you can in your life, then so be it. Do not let doubt, your own and perhaps other peoples’, stand in your way. I know that many of you are elbow deep into your research now and some of you are just now considering how you will enter your sites, what conceptual and methodological frameworks you will construct to gather your data, or who the people will be that will help you answer your questions. This is exciting: the confusion, the chaos, the fog, and then the clarity.

Enjoy this next phase of your journey and never cease seeking that which may be mysterious and elusive in your research. Thank you.

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