

## WHY I NO LONGER TEACH WORKSHOPS

People keep asking me why I no longer teach workshops. The short answer is that, after 33 years of doing so, I am worn out. The long answer is that I am worn out; it just uses more words.

For much of my life I have wanted to do only two things: write and teach. They were, you might say, what I most loved to do as work; the only things I wanted to *do* as work. As is true of most people with dreams, I had to do, and be, a lot of other things along the way in order to make enough money to survive: donut maker/baker, construction laborer, fine woodworker, house remodeling, furniture making, rare book seller, psychotherapist, herbalist. The list, as it is for many writers, is a long one. Other than making donuts and construction laboring I enjoyed most of them to one extent or another . . . some of them very much indeed.

But my deeper love has always been those two things: writing and teaching in workshop settings. As is true with all dreams, the reality has only a partial relationship to the fantasies and pictures we have when young. For one thing, teaching the way I wanted to do it involved “the road.”

“The road” is a strange place and a strange way of life. I can’t really understand how musicians and comedians survive the 200-280 days they travel each year . . . year after year after year. I never did have that kind of stamina. At my peak, I wrote for six months (over the winter) and then spent six months on the road teaching. And during those road months, I was home a lot. I usually taught two weekends a month, flying out on a Wednesday or Thursday and back again on a Monday. Flying then, as it still often is, was pretty much the same as wearing underwear three sizes too small for 6-14 hours straight while being far too closely surrounded by the moist

breath of strangers, trapped in bad restaurant at 30,000 feet with air stewards who realized some time ago they made a horrible career choice.

Since 9/11, however, flying is more akin to a public proctology exam in Walmart in a checkout line in which the cashier has just discovered that none of your items possess barcodes *or* price tags.

It would be 25 years before I made a living at what I wanted to do as a career; my first year's income was \$5000, \$3500 of which was a book advance.

In the early days, as they often still do, in order to save costs, workshop host/promoters usually put me up with someone, an attendee or friend, who was also supposed to feed me. This is how I learned to love motels . . . and never to leave home without emergency food stores.

I still remember, as I always will, staying in the (badly) converted chicken coop with no food or water for three days. And all the hot dogs, candy bars, and soda I ate and drank at the minimart once I had escaped. And all the stomach and bowel troubles afterwards.

I still remember the fifteenth-century sheep herder's cottage in Ireland with no heating. In February. With continual horizontal rain. And one hundred percent humidity. The temperature never quite dropped to freezing, though it flirted with it . . . every day. Even after living at 9000 feet in the Colorado Rockies for ten years with six months of winter and 32 feet of snow I'd never been so cold. I spent the entire time curled around a hot water bottle, crying. (On the inside, of course, a real karate man doesn't show his weaknesses.)

And, unfortunately, I still remember the house in San Diego. Just as we were pulling into the drive the man said, "Just gonna say this once, not much for cleaning." Perhaps the greatest understatement I have ever heard.

The wall-to-wall white carpet had apparently been neither cleaned nor vacuumed for the

past twenty years. It had a rather unfortunate resemblance to a dalmatian in its coloration. . . though the dogs are rarely so sticky to the hand.

“I was going to have a bed for you,” the man said as we entered the house, “but my son sold it last week. I got this for you though.”

“This” was a rather elderly, two-inch foam mattress, on the dog-resembling floor. The man looked at me questioningly: “Do, you need sheets?” Numbly, I nodded.

He led me down the hall. “Don’t use that bathroom,” he said pointing to my left. The sight was anything but comforting. The bathroom toilet had cracked, obviously long ago, and its former contents had dried blackly on the tile floor. Unfortunately that was the only working shower in the house. The working toilet was, regrettably in the other bathroom, where the sheetrock over the shower had molded so badly it had finally decayed and fallen into the stall.

The stall itself was covered in spider webs and the mold, like some terrible creeping shadow, was extending thready tendrils toward the toilet and the rest of the room. I feared a full bladder.

Regrettably, mine host had rented the bedroom nearest mine to a tremendously overweight man who walked the house in a bathrobe purchased in thinner days. The belt met, barely, at its last few inches and the tips, tied firmly together, were all that prevented wardrobe malfunctions. Despite this, it provided meager coverage; I wished, the entire time, he would wear underwear.

To make things worse, he apparently had something wrong with his bowels, and spent much of the night releasing the most audible flatulence in my experience. After each explosion a great groan would emerge followed by the words, “Oh, god! Oh, my god!”

I spent far too much of the night dreading the next eruption, trying to avoid listening for

it, and failing.

The only food provided for me that night was a horribly overcooked acorn squash which explained to me the reason he had asked me every few miles if I wanted to stop and buy some food. “No,” I had said far too innocently, certain in the knowledge that lodging *and* food were to be provided as part of my teaching.

The table the disreputable squash was served upon was missing a leg which had been replaced by packing boxes. With a sigh, the man sat and began scooping the squash up and into his mouth with his fingers. Luckily, I had already learned the hard way to always take emergency rations in my carry on. This workshop in San Diego, by the way, occurred *after* I began using a contract spelling out accommodation, food, travel, and financial agreements. I suspect it was reality’s way of explaining to me that if a person’s word is no good, a signed contract is unlikely to be useful in its place. I never used one again.

I still remember the feminists I stayed with who thought men were the reason for all the problems in the world (and shared the news with me every day). And the vegans who thought meat eaters (yes, I do) were destroying the planet (and shared the news with me every day). And the African-American woman who saw hidden racism everywhere (and dissected my every statement to prove it . . . every day).

And these were only a few of the *places* I stayed. The events themselves often had their own problems.

I remember the conference in Maine. Most of the events were held outdoors, in the midst of an incredibly cold penetrating rain. No bathrooms just port-o-potties which, unfortunately, had not been emptied after their previous year’s use – nor had anyone replaced the empty toilet paper rolls. Those of us still able to move our joints in the freezing rain found that the only amusement

the weekend offered was observing people as they made that first hasty run for the potties and the expression on their faces when they emerged. (We had of course already gone through the experience ourselves.)

The sewage in the port-o-potty lapped the edges of the upper rim, just under the toilet seat. Women were often able to survive this, men, however, had to be extremely careful to avoid genital dunking. The lack of toilet paper exacerbated the experience considerably. It was with great horror, after our first sojourn, that, later, each of us would notice the first, faint trembling of our bladder, or worse, our bowels, signaling another journey would soon be inevitable. And to be clear, notebook paper is not a decent substitute for toilet tissue.

I remember, too, the woman in Colorado who neglected to let me read the flyer copy for my *Sacred Plant Medicine* workshop before she printed and mailed the flyers. One thousand of them announced to the world an upcoming *Scared Plant Medicine* workshop. No one enrolled. Too frightened I imagine.

And I will never forget the time a woman in Chicago rented space at a deactivated nuclear power plant for a similar workshop. Unfortunately, the hotel at that location (Why was it located there? Why go there for a vacation? Some questions have no answers) had afterward been contacted by the University of Chicago, the hotel's major renter. U of C wanted to rent the entire place for a conference . . . but only if they could get every room. So, without much concern, the hotel agreed, giving them the room we were to use. They neglected to inform the woman promoting/hosting the event that they had done so. The only space left was in the basement, near and under the primary heating and water pipes, which, since they were being troublesome at the time were completely exposed; there was no finished ceiling in place. The floor sloped into a central drain set in cement, around which were arranged our chairs in a circle,

edge to edge. Fortunately, I had learned years before to always fly in early just in case.

We discovered that some of the conference rooms only had 4 or 5 people in them (rooms designed to hold 100) so we asked if the conference presenters would let us use one of them since some of the remaining rooms could be divided into two. The short answer was no, so was the long one.

So. . . in desperation, we had the hotel clear one of the suites of its furniture. We sat on the floor, all thirty of us, straggling around the edges of the room while I tried, not very successfully, to make the event as positive as possible for the people who had paid that woman so much money and, for some of them, come so far. Still, I thought, we can spend as much time as possible outside. That will get us out of the cramped room, help make the weekend better.

Regrettably, the U of C conference attendees were students. They, we unfortunately discovered, viewed the weekend as a free-for-all party once their daily meetings were finished. During the plant walks we found, to our dismay, scores of used condoms, draped over the bushes, lying shrunken and forlorn on the ground, abandoned behind every tree, rock, and building. There was literally no place to sit and study the plants without encountering the remains of their spent passion. And, of course, to make the experience worse, we were at a deactivated nuclear power plant. The attendees, after their meditations, would report the most distressing feelings about the plants and landscape. I still feel deep regret for what the attendees suffered that weekend.

Some weekends, I found, are just not salvageable.

Rarely, there were also the promoters/hosts who, unknown to me, seemed to think that a weekend workshop should provide them money for several years income, charging attendees anywhere from \$800 to \$1000 per person for a two or three day workshop. And there were the

promoters who didn't pay afterwards (even after months and months of calls and emails) or else reneged on the agreed payment, constantly trying to get me to accept a great deal less. And I still remember all the conflicts that caused, the angry feelings, the arguments. (No humorous anecdotes here, just painful learnings.)

All these problems had to be solved, of course, usually in the moment, on the fly, often with little support. Sometimes, if the problems were severe enough, I would cancel the workshop . . . if I found out in time. Generally, like most workshop teachers, I just struggled through as best I could, sometimes elegantly, sometimes not. But always trying to create as beneficial an experience as possible under the circumstances. Some of the attendees, I am sure, regret tremendously that they ever attended.

And, of course, there were sometimes troublesome students. I remember the one who would not let her picture be taken for a class on diagnosis because it would be disrespectful (it was in the literature as a requirement for attendance), the one abused by aliens who felt we were enabling the destruction of the human species by our refusal to acknowledge the problem, the paranoid schizophrenic who accused everyone of staring at her for three days, the woman in the wheel chair who did not inform anyone of her condition before she arrived for the plant hike into the wilderness and the three male attendees who resolutely took turns carrying her on their backs for the weekend. I still remember the expression in their eyes as they were slowly worn down, hiking mile after mile after mile through that uneven landscape.

I still remember the attendees who felt quite strongly (and were quite vocal throughout) that the workshop was seriously deficient because it did not clearly make the point that (take your pick) science and only science, Wicca and only Wicca, veganism and only veganism, Jesus and only Jesus, destruction and only destruction of the patriarchy, permaculture and only

permaculture, schooling and only schooling, women in congress and only women in congress, the end of animal testing and only the end of animal testing, the abolition of the second amendment and only the abolition of the second amendment, solar electricity and only solar electricity (and scores more assertions of every stripe) was the only way to save the planet.

They taught me more deeply than I wished that fundamentalism is not only a problem of the right but exists as a common shadow among my liberal tribe. And I remember how much time it took during the workshops to respond to such ideologies and how much the other attendees lost in consequence. Regrettably, I have found, the majority of the problems I have had over the past 33 years occurred with the most actively New Age and love-and-light members of my tribe.

And then there was the food . . . the undercooked vegetarian meals, often of glumpy brown rice and barely warm carrots and eggplant. Often there was little to no seasoning (so as not to offend anyone's taste) making so many of us long for Indian or Thai food. I remember sitting around bleak formica tables at rundown YMCA camps grimly chewing through innumerable meals like that (my jaws are like iron). This food (we were endlessly told) was better for the planet (and cheaper) but was, and is, in the deepest sense, an offense to any nascent aesthetic sense a human being might possess. It felt then, and in the memories still feels, as if the worst possible mother of all time were standing over us and insisting we eat our vegetables.

It all sounds rather bleak, doesn't it. It wasn't always like this though. These events, while continual over the years, only occurred every five workshops or so. Eighty percent of the time it was very different, much better, much more joyful.

There were many wonderful promoters/hosts like Kathleen Maier in Virginia, Richard Klein in Canada, Kate Gilday in New York, Shatoiya de la Tour in California. Many places that

provided wonderful food. Many events where the rooms were wonderful, the people joyous, the teaching a magical experience. There were many times where the plant gods came and touched all of us with their grace and wisdom. Times when all the cosmic tumblers clicked into place and together we entered another world, more ancient than our own, and found there parts of ourselves we needed to become whole. (I, too, like this land have lost parts of myself.) These times are what I lived for, why I began the work so long ago. And for many years it was enough to get me through. Like jockeys I didn't think about the falls or the broken bones, I loved the work and the work was enough.

But I have found that all the years of woodworking and construction, all the years of typing all those books, the newer work with musical instruments has played havoc with my joints. (I can maintain them with herbs, I cannot make them new again; life leaves its traces in all of us, written in the lines of our faces, in the slow settling of our bodies. None of us will ever be young again.) It is harder to do what I once did with ease, harder to ignore the aches and pains.

And all the years of living full out, the road, the journeys into wilderness, the interior work, and the soul excavation necessary to hold space for the work have taken their toll. And the thirty-three years of holding workshop space, holding each and every attendee in my heart, attending to every tiny fluctuation of energy and meaning in the group, shaping a weekend or a week or a year of apprenticeship into a coherent whole, a single performance piece filled with deep shifts of mind and cognition and information and love . . . have taken their toll as well. The energy comes less easily now and is far harder to replace once used. By nearly all American standards I am very healthy . . . but the old pace is beyond me. I find I am worn out.

I am, as all of us are, biodegrading. And . . . we are supposed to biodegrade you know; it is core to the nature of life in this place. We are given the gift of our life, and in time we must

give it back again. Each of us has our turn. And as our turn comes to an end, it is time for others to take our place. Time for others to come into their own, to take hold of the thing that was passed into us from our teachers. Time for them to carry it into the world, to shape it, not as we feel it should be shaped, but as they feel it should. Time when it must speak through those that follow us in new words for new generations. For all of us, sooner or later, the great relay race of the soul comes to an end.

There are still things set before me to do. Final books to be written, final words to be said, final discoveries to be made. The final things my teacher set before me to do all those long years ago. Part of that is the music, the plant and Earth song, the instruments made from plants that brought music to the human species, the work with synaesthesia and the ecstatic journey of the soul for those of us on the Earth path. But those things are things to be done outside workshops, in other forms and expressions.

Still, at this point in time, I find myself grateful. Grateful for the years and the work. Grateful for the students, for all of you who took the chance to study with me, who have bought my books and found in them some truth that helped you on your own journey. It has been a blessing, a life worth living, and I thank you for it.

Be well now, journey in health and wholeness, and maybe our paths will cross one day when we least expect it, out there, far out there, in the wildness of the world.

