

## *The Canceling Experiences of a Middle-class Old White Guy*

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There is magic in writing. I often experience it. Words just come out of me and land on the page (screen). When I read my writing I'm often surprised. Did I write that? I write mostly because I can't not. My genre has been confined largely to academic, so often known to be stodgy and dry by nature. Yet as book has succeeded book I've added pinches of spice and allowed my voice to become increasingly personal. Thirteen books now; the last currently in production at Oxford University Press. I've rarely shared my writing with anyone save talking through developing ideas with my students. Publication to me is something like setting free a captive bird. It just flies off, disappearing in pursuit of its nature, without me knowing where it went. Fly. Be free.



I've been a gym rat since one of my mid-life crises. Around age forty-five I started going to the gym most days to take a movement class: aerobics, step aerobics, street dance, Zumba, hip hop, body jam. Saved my life. The practice persisted through the decades. At age seventy-seven I'm still at it. Indeed, these days the two hip hop classes I take every week are my most enjoyable hours. I'm often the only male in these classes. The closest in age to me is usually around thirty years my junior with the average age being more like forty-five years younger. Happily, while dancing hip hop, absorbed by the dance, I can't think about age. I don't think anyone else can either.



After over thirty-five years teaching at the University of Colorado I retired a few days short of my seventy-sixth birthday. There was no retirement party. There were no cards. No balloons. No one in my life noticed. A few months later, I found in my mailbox a bubbled envelope containing an odd little paper weight featuring a buffalo—funny that a university would identify itself with a herd animal—from the administration with a pre-printed card “thank you for your service.”



My seventeen-year-old granddaughter has danced on competitive companies for eleven years. I do not think I've missed a single one of her performances; although, like today, I've watched some of them live-streamed from other cities (today Anaheim). I've joined dance moms to chaperone groups of dancers on dance trips. I've spent countless hours in studio reception areas doing my own work and chatting with dance moms. Many of them have graciously embraced me as an enthusiastic and devoted dance grandpa. None of them know that I operated a dance studio for years or that I have traveled to many countries to study and learn the dances of other people or that I've written extensively on dancing. We are simply joined in the fellowship of engaged adults supporting our beloved youth as they navigate the trials, joys, and rewards of the rigorous and competitive world of dancing.



“Cancel culture” is a phenomenon I’ve only recently become aware of, at least by this term. It seems to be focused mostly on the cultures enabled by social media. It is the intentional canceling of “friends” or memberships or associations on social media as a means of protest. Maybe just the refusal to “like.” It is a form of social shunning and a public display of punishment often for but an incidental, perhaps even accidental, reason. Those experiencing being “canceled” talk about their considerable distress and the often-long-lasting emotional and professional impact of being canceled. They describe it as painful yet it often resulting in finding greater self-awareness and confidence; in being more persistent and tenacious. Experiences akin to being canceled have, I think, have colored much of my life.



My social circle is now comprised of my kids and grandkids, a few dance moms, several gym dance class women, and a couple friends. Most female. Their ages, mostly, range from thirty to seventy years my junior. I miss the lively exchange with students. It is becoming obvious that I’ve somehow canceled most connections among age peers.



Photographs starkly confirm that Republican members of congress are almost totally old white men. I’m clearly prejudiced, yet I identify them as mostly narrow-minded, sold-out, amoral, out of touch, dishonest, angry and cantankerous old men with undeserved outsized power. They thoroughly disgust me. I am flummoxed people choose them as their representatives. They make me ashamed to be their age/race/gender peer.



In the first year after retiring I published two books. Only a couple times have I seen either in the actual hands of another human being.



My twenty-seven-year marriage ended for me about twenty-seven years ago. Since I’d missed out on over twenty years of experience as a single person, I found myself the social peer of those much younger. For the first two decades of being single again I had a few relationships. None lasting more than a couple years. Though I’ve never thought I was particularly physically attractive, when I looked in the mirror at age seventy, all I could see was old-age-ugly. Trees gain beauty with age; humans not so much. I could no longer bring myself to even think about relationships. A few months ago, I was present, with my two adult kids, at the death of my ex-spouse who had suffered the long decline through Alzheimer’s. The four of us re-united for a final time. If we are patient even the ugliness and hurt of a broken marriage might finally be canceled.



Recently my reflections, those of an old man thinking of legacy, often land on who it is I am and have been. What a shock it is to try to take in the whole story. It seems the answer should be that I am an academic—a teacher and an author. In my latest published writings, I often ask, betraying incredulity,

why have I lived an academic life for more than half century? The consideration of the question has not led to much clarity. I keep returning to the idea that who we are at core is what we do without question or reflection; what we do without realizing there is even a choice. I am a parent and grandparent.



Although I despise Trump and feel sad that the main options among the Democrats gravitate toward old white men, all my septuagenarian peers, I have to admit that I'm amazed by the physical stamina of these old guys. I notice little, beyond appearance, in my life that might signal decline other than how long it takes me to physically recover from doing an all-out hip hop class. Yet these old guys who likely don't ever go to the gym or eat properly can still do multiple events a day and travel constantly. Given my healthy life-style and theirs not so much, I really don't understand how they do it.



My most constant effort is to think about and effect whatever might enrich the lives of my kids and grandkids. While I have plenty of ideas about the course of their lives, I have tried my best to keep these thoughts to myself, save offering an occasional hint or uncontrolled blurt. I know my parents were eager to support me and assist me, yet due to scant means their support was primarily that of offering abiding love. That was certainly sufficient, yet I have tried to show my offspring steadfast love complemented with a few other means that I sometimes refer to, making light of disappointment, as the bounty of me being an Uber driver, a bill-payer, and a baby sitter.



A persistent leitmotif of the tune that is my academic career has been the appreciation of folks quite different than those of my own white middle-class male identity set. As the son of a Kansas dirt farmer, I don't understand where this persistent interest came from. It has not been confined to the abstract arena of my academic work. It has also manifested in my personal life. I founded and operated a dance and music school and studio that focused on non-western or world cultures. I have traveled frequently to countries whose people are black or brown. I sponsored cultural exchange visas for dozens of brown artists to reside and integrate into the overly white society to which I have belonged. In this environment, my daughter married brown men and her babies (my grandkids) are brown. Yet the accident of my birth has given me the prominent identity factors of whiteness, middle-classness, and maleness all of which are typically identified with privilege. I somehow must at once cherish and regret these superficial identity markers and their social implications. These indelible immutable identity traits seem to me so utterly banal and boring; I associate their implications with shame and regret.



To my family—parents, siblings, kids and grandkids—my academic life somehow remained largely unknown. I don't know how that happened. No one in my family ever attended a class I taught, a lecture I gave, or, so far as I know, has read a word I published. For a while I sent my parents copies of books I published. After their deaths these all came back in pristine condition; obviously not opened. For a while I tried to mention to my kids signal accomplishments like book publications. What did I expect in response? Now I just keep to myself any information regarding my academic

work and publications. As an alternative, I recently self-published a 12" x 14" hard-bound book titled "On Reflection: Vignettes and Images" comprised of a bunch of photographs I have taken mostly in Norway, Sweden, and Iceland along with a dozen prose-poems engaging a range of topics. The poems correlate with the photographs. I spent six months crafting and honing these images and writings. I gave the book to my kids as a gift. It inspired no comment.



Over my more than half a century teaching, my students were more interesting to me than my academic colleagues. I always felt I was my truest self in the classroom where I could openly admit my limits and eagerly learn from and with my students. Together, I insisted, we should strive to make a difference. So many intellectuals I greatly admire treasured many deep peer friendships; something I almost never experienced. Most of my peers seemed to me, perhaps unfairly, to be bent on besting their colleagues by spouting sources and overly valuing arcane ideas shorn of any mystery. Such folks often seemed to be slightly hostile and their work, often to me tedious and obscure, not so interesting. It is not that I don't have a long list of intellectual writers whose work I find remarkable, interesting, inspiring, and essential to my life. It is just that I seemed never to have personal relationships with more than a very few of them.



Most of the intellectuals I most admire—Michel Serres, Jonathan Z. Smith, Jean Baudrillard—have possessed a vast knowledge of intellectual literature and they were proficient in a number of languages. I loved school as a kid in Cherryvale Kansas. The saddest day of the year was the last day of school in the spring. I played all the sports. I was editor of the school newspaper and the yearbook. I was in all the school plays. I got all A grades. Yet, it was a rural farm community and I was offered no foreign language, little history, no anthropology, no classics, no arts beyond the school marching band in which I played trumpet. I've tried to recall when I discovered that not all people in the world speak the same language. Could have been high school. Really? My Chicago mentor, Jonathan Smith, had read the thirteen-volumes of Frazer's *The Golden Bough* before starting high school. My college major was mathematics with a physics minor. I had a couple required plodding semesters of French. I thought literature was useless until I read Faulkner in Dr. Kennedy's required lit class at Wichita State. My first graduate degree was a Master of Arts in Business. I worked in a corporate job for several years. I started my study of religion at the University of Chicago with the intent of it being a temporary sabbatical from what I expected to be a career in business. Only recently did it dawn on me that the only reason Chicago admitted me was because a 1963 Supreme Court decision had determined it constitutional to teach religion in state-supported colleges and Chicago had become a factory to produce faculty to meet the instant surge in demand. Thus, in 1967 I was an odd risk they needed to take. I was profoundly ill-prepared and didn't even know it, yet I persisted because I couldn't ignore the vast rich world I'd somehow stumbled into. Yet, I never fit. I simply didn't have the requisite background and skills. Shaped by my lack of reading knowledge of foreign languages and my having no mastery of fundamental bibliography, my career has amounted to a stream of naïve responses to the surprise of incongruity.



In what is the ultimate canceling, I find myself increasingly living in anticipation of my death. Why do we exist? What becomes of our lives? Is there any sense in it at all? Every morning and evening I glance at a favorite photo of my now long-dead parents. I know that my older sister also thinks of them. I realize that when the two of us are gone there will remain nothing of my parents in the memories of living people. They will effectively disappear into some impersonal ether. I'll not be far behind. In such a relatively short span of years following death most of us become canceled, existing only as a datum absorbed in the vast evolutionary flow of biology and history. A nit in the plethora of abundance digested by process. A droplet splashed briefly above the surface to be quickly reabsorbed into the immense sea of existence. I feel shame and sadness that the world I'll leave will surely threaten the freedoms and possibilities, if not also the very existence, of my grandkids.

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