

## From Here to Clare: Yearnings of a Scholar-Turned-Dad

Carney Strange, Bowling Green State University

---

### Introduction

I've long considered questions of wholeness, meaning, and purpose in life, at least for 58 good years. As a college student in the 1960s, I considered such concerns much more important than making the grade or getting a job. It was much easier to ask, "What do you believe and value?" than "What will you do with that degree?". That's probably why I chose to teach junior high school for two years following graduation. There were always lots of openings, and what else could I have done with a degree in French literature, wrapped around the study of philosophy and classical languages? I had never really considered what I was to do with all that.

As it turned out, I was a terrible junior high school teacher, for a variety of reasons. The need to search for something else to which I could commit myself became apparent, if not a desperate desire of a "twenty-something" who wasn't quite ready to settle into life's calling. After several other fits and starts I did eventually find my path, and 34 years later I am still on it. Only now I am fully convinced that I was called to do this work, teaching graduate students in higher education and student affairs. Wholeness, meaning, and purpose have indeed converged in my spirit such that I cannot imagine myself ever having done anything else in life but this.

However, being a professor is only one of my roles. I have been a friend and spouse to Dorothyann for 30 years, and a father to our three children: Julia (24), Martin (21), and Clare (18). While my public life has cast me into the scholarship of how college students learn, develop, and grow, my private life has called me to be guru, guide, and at times, goat to three aspiring young adults. My professional hat covers a head full of propositions and theories about all that; my personal hat covers a heart full of yearnings, desires, and wishes for each of the young souls I have accompanied into this life.

As I read the literature in this area, and know well from personal experience, it tells me that the college years are replete with challenges and opportunities to make meaning of it all—life's purposes, life's ways, and life's ends (Parks, 2000). A time characterized in most students' lives by significant transitions (Levinson & Levinson, 1996), going to college is an occasion for approaching the big questions life offers. I have discussed them elsewhere (Strange, 2000) as "spiritual questions," framed by their relevance to personal identity, relationships, and purposes. Thus, questions of self-definition and understanding translate, for example, into "Of what worth or value am I?" and "What inspires me?" Questions of relationship to others become reflections

---

*Carney Strange is a professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University, where he has taught, since 1978, courses in student development, campus environments, and spiritual dimensions of the college experience. He is a Senior Scholar in the American College Personnel Association and a Faculty Fellow in the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators.*

---

like “To whom am I connected?” and “How have I experienced forgiveness?” And last, questions of purpose and direction might ask, for purposes of illustration, “Who and what guides me?” and “For what or whom would I be willing to die?” Answers to such questions become the substance of what Parks (2000) calls the *faithing* process, the “ongoing composing of the heart’s true resting place” (p. 24). This process, she suggests, benefits from a mentoring environment that offers participants “a network of belonging, big enough questions, encounters with otherness, important habits of mind, worthy dreams, [and] access to key images, concepts (content), and practices . . . .” (p. 135). Perhaps like no other institution, higher education seems well suited to the designs of such an environment. After all, where else is there such a concentration of resources aimed at the expressed purpose of human learning and development? The typical college or university campus is hard to beat in terms of the array of opportunities and choices it features. So goes the scholarship on the matter.

The encounter between what I read and write, and what I live, defines here my own moment of meaning, wholeness, and authenticity. My desire to understand the college experience takes on new dimensions as I think about advising my own three students at home. The first two have already taken flight, to some extent. They have heard most of what they are going to hear from me, at least until they return on their own terms. The last one is about to peer over the edge of the nest for the first time. She is the one for whom my scholarship speaks most immediately. What would these questions sound like in her life at this moment? What would my thoughts be when stripped of the trappings of rigor and dispassionate insight? How would my suggestions carry when their recipient is one of my own? What would I say in the name of Clare?

November 1, 2005  
Bowling Green, OH

My Dearest Clare,

*I’m sitting in my office, in a bittersweet moment, thinking about you and what you will be doing only months from now as you anticipate heading off to college. In one hand is my black mortarboard, sun-faded from years of outdoor convocations and commencements; in the other is a weathered baseball cap, my “dad hat,” soft and crumpled from season sidelines and walks to the Dairy Queen. You’re the caboose of the family, the last of three to pull out of the station. With your leaving will end the story of parenthood for me, at least the present stage, and begin a new one with all the wonder of the possibilities it promises.*

*You’re extra special to me, Catherine Clare---my “cardiac kid.” You arrived as a gift at a time when life itself hung in the balance. Not knowing where things would lead then, the November 20th joy of your appearance was the birth for me of hope itself. You will always remind me that life gives you all you need, if you only remain open to what it offers. And now, as you grow impatient with the high school years, and look with anxious anticipation for what is to come, I am reminded that it is time to turn this over to you and once again to let life bring what it may.*

*I suppose this is as good a time as any for me to tell you what’s on my mind about all this. I’m sure you’re going to have a great time in college, but there’s a certain part of me that wants it to be the very best time of your life. I can’t really tell you how to do that, but my experience in studying and*

---

*working with college students all these years (as I don my mortarboard) points to a number of ideas that might make sense and help you along the way.*

*You will soon find yourself at a point in life when things will become more confusing than certain. You will change some things and keep others. “Best friends” might move-on and new ones will appear. What you thought for sure you wanted to do will become yet another resting place on the way to that which will eventually call you. You’ll know when that happens, but don’t look for it too soon. Give yourself time to explore and consider the possibilities. Listen carefully and the world around you will help you answer that. In the meantime, give some thought to a few steps you can take to help bring yourself along. In brief, these include finding a network of belonging, asking big questions, encountering otherness, developing good habits of mind, dreaming worthy dreams, seeking the best images, and practicing hearth, table, and commons with others. This might sound a bit “strange” at present (a pun you will hear many times in college!), but the power of these ideas will become clearer to you as time goes on. All you have to remember now is B-Q-O-H-W-D-I-P (or “Barbecue in Ohio with Dip”). This is a mnemonic (a word or phrase used to remember something else) I teach my students to organize what we know about how to nurture the quest for authenticity and wholeness (that is, “becoming yourself”) in college. Put these ideas together and you have what’s called a “mentoring community,” a good place for your spirit. Let me tell you about them (and for that I need my dad hat).*

### **Network of Belonging**

[A mentoring community is a “network of belonging that constitutes a spacious home for the potential and vulnerability of the young adult imagination in practical, tangible terms” (Parks, 2000, p.135). It serves both “to reassure and to encourage the development of inner-dependence” (p. 136).]

*Clare, I’ve watched you walk confidently into a group and bring it to a point. You share the gifts of your “Granny” and “Aunt Hat” on that count. Others have recognized your abilities along these lines too, and have asked you to take up the role of leader from time to time. Being captain of the girl’s varsity soccer team, president of the Spanish Club, and informal chair and organizer of whatever group project comes along, you wear these hats well, like a natural. Your own creative instincts, sense of purpose, and willingness to “jump-in” seem to put others at ease when you’re in charge. They clearly benefit from having you around. These are the same gifts that will work well for you when you get to college.*

*After settling-in a bit, give some thought to how you might want to become involved on campus. There are many different groups you can join—Greek letter organizations, intramural teams, student clubs, service initiatives, and advocacy groups. Some are committed to changing the world, some offer creative outlets, some focus on leadership, some require a faithful use of time, and others bring the benefits of social support and connection. All of them desire members who can be good followers as well as*

---

leaders, who understand their purposes, and who can contribute to their ends.

I don't have to tell you about the power of a group. Remember the time we went to Washington, D.C. to let the President know how we felt about what he was doing in the name of our country? We created our signs the night before, drove ten hours to the nation's capital in a single day, and marched past the White House with thousands who shared our views. There was a sense of power and energy we felt beyond belief as the ranks swelled block after block, elbows locked and eyes intent and determined. In dramatic tone that was the synergy of a group you experienced that day. Most days in a group however will be much more ordinary, but the effect over time will be the same. Find a group on campus that needs what you have to give, and create a unique space with your shape such that, when you leave, you are missed and the group is not at all the same without you. Build that group into your schedule and look forward to its gatherings. Think about how you will leave the group a better one than when you first joined it. I know you're really going to enjoy this part of college.

### **Big Enough Questions**

[Mentoring environments have the "capacity to extend hospitality to big questions" (Parks, 2000, p. 137). "Big questions stretch us. They reveal the gaps in our knowledge, in our social arrangements, in our ambitions and aspirations. Big questions are . . . ones that ultimately matter" (p. 137).]

Do you remember, Clare, when you were little we used to walk the neighborhood block, hand in hand, during the warm months of daylight savings each summer? You must have been about four years old, so full of questions, skipping ahead, and landing on some sort of treasure in the form of a small stick or creepy crawly looking for a quick crossing. How do lightning bugs light? What makes the sun go down? Why do we live in a house? When can I go to school? Your thoughts would lead to a giggle or two, but more often you'd return with more "Why? Why? Why's?" Like the Woody Guthrie rhyme I used to sing with you at bedtime, my answer was always "because, because, because."

It's time to bring those questions back again, only now they might sound a bit different to you, perhaps more real, much larger, and more permanent. What are your hopes and fears? How can you become a better person? What is sacred to you? What is your experience of community? What does it mean to be faithful? What counts as a good life? Where will your path lead you? What is the purpose of your life? In addition to your friends, find a few faculty, staff, and trusted advisors you admire and have a conversation with them about these things. Ask them how they answer these questions. Listen to what they consider important. Ask yourself whether their responses fit what you hold. Listen for their doubts, their reasons, their hopes, and their expectations. Uncertainty is where it all begins. Ask lots of questions.

Schedule a course in philosophy sometime. Consider an elective in sociology, psychology, or communications. Maybe you'll have a chance to study American culture, history, business, or religion. Every discipline brings big questions to the world around you. Learn what those questions are and

---

*how each field answers them. What are their best ideas? Who are the proponents? Who opposes them? What are the issues in each discipline and who has a stake in them? Who speaks to you most convincingly about them? To which ones are you drawn? What questions are left unanswered? What confuses you? What ideas raise even more questions? Explore them and try them on. Eventually you'll learn to recognize "your perspective" on things, and questions that seem elusive will begin to appear closer and become accessible. This is the best part of college.*

### **Encounters with Otherness**

[“One of the most significant features of the human adventure is the capacity to take the perspective of another and to be compelled thereby to recompose one’s own perspective, one’s own faith” (Parks, 2000, p. 140) . . . .A mentoring environment is a place where “hospitality to otherness is prized and practiced” (p. 141), promoting "consciousness of another, and thus [vulnerability] to re-imagining self, other, world, and ‘God’” (p. 141).]

*I have a feeling that this is an area where you will shine. You’ve always been curious about others, and from what I’ve observed over the years, you’ve developed a special appreciation for those a bit on the edge, those who differ from the usual. I think you have good instincts for the unique and the “other.” Don’t take this for granted though. Make it a point to reach out to and befriend others who have experienced a life different from yours - someone from a large city, someone who is the first in the family to attend college, an African American, a Latino, a lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender student, a Christian fundamentalist, a Muslim moderate, someone with a learning disability, a student from another country, one from South Texas or Vermont, a young Republican, a peace activist, an ROTC member, a male in nursing, a female in chemistry, a student athlete, a neighborhood jogger. The possibilities are endless. Each one brings a story that will enrich you and help you understand your own.*

*We’ve talked about your interest in studying abroad, how you hope to spend some time in Spain during college. I think that’s really a great idea, and I know that such an experience will mean so much to you, just like it did for your sister. We will need to look ahead and put aside some resources to make that happen. You’ll also need to anticipate how you will be able to fulfill your major requirements while doing all this. Getting some good advice on this end will save you headaches on the other end. I can’t wait to visit you wherever you choose to go. Spending time in others’ shoes is so important for learning how to walk through life.*

### **Habits of Mind**

[Mentoring environments create “norms of discourse and inclusion that invite genuine dialogue, strengthen critical thought, encourage connective-holistic awareness, and develop the contemplative mind” (Parks, 2000, p. 142). “When one speaks, and then is heard – but not quite, and therefore tries to speak yet more clearly – and then listens to the other – and understands, but not quite, and listens again – one becomes actively engaged in sorting out what is true and dependable within oneself and about one’s world. How one makes meaning is composed and recomposed in this process” (p. 142).]

---

*I suspect that this will be a challenge for you as you proceed through college. You're a quick study, with a wit to match, and if I can say so myself you've inherited a genetic predisposition (probably mine) for waiting until the last moment to dash through the door before it slams shut. I suppose there's something about the intensity and energy that seems to focus everything at such moments, so that concentration comes easier and things seem to hum along at a productive clip. I've seen you do some of your best work under those conditions, but I know you also pay a price for that. Along with the thrill of pulling another "rabbit out of the hat" comes the inevitable anxiety and stress that wears you down in the process. Being successful in college is not just about producing things on time; it's about using enough time well to develop habits of dialogue, critique, reflection, and contemplation. It's out of an immersion in these thoughtful practices over time that a sense of how it all "fits together" will come someday.*

*There are lots of ways of exercising these practices. There's a great course on Critical Thinking in the Honor's Program that will get you going nicely in your academic career. Think about taking it in your first or second semester. Get in the habit of spending time with others, late at night, over dinner, or with a good Starbucks drink at the Student Union, just talking about things. Listen to what others think is important, how they decide about their choices, what their consequences might be. Find someone who often disagrees with you and make it a point to meet occasionally, just to debate something. Attend some of the speakers who come to campus. They obviously have something to say; ask yourself whether you agree with them. Read a book that causes you to think about something controversial -- a social issue, a policy choice, a practice of some sort or another; ask yourself how what you are studying in your courses at the moment might relate to what the book has to offer. Keep a journal of your best ideas; return to it often, re-read and revise it. Think about how you change each year in what you think or how you approach things. Find a favorite spot on campus, indoors or out, where you enjoy being alone and quiet (I know, they're hard to find these days). Call that "your time" on your schedule and try to be faithful to it. Maybe it's once every few days; maybe sometimes it's every day. Use it to enjoy the rhythm of action and reflection in what you do. You'll be busy enough in college. Learn to count these moments of solitude as "productive." Fill them with nothing but resting in the presence of who you are becoming, enjoying the sense of connectedness to this world and what it seems to be calling you to do. Bring your journal.*

### **Worthy Dreams**

[A worthy Dream constitutes "a quality of vision . . . an imagined possibility that orients meaning, purpose, and aspiration" (Parks, 2000, p. 146). It is "a relational sensibility in which I recognize that what I do with my time, talents, and treasure is most meaningfully conceived not as a matter of personal passion and preference but in relationship to the whole of life . . . . Vocation is the place where the heart's deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger" (p. 148).]

---

*You'll hear these questions often enough in college: "What's your major?" "What will you do with that?" "What kind of job will that lead to?" As unappealing as it may seem, especially when everyone else "knows" what they want to do, try not to declare a major for at least a year (or two), and when you do, don't think about the kind of job you'll get with that choice. Those decisions will come soon enough. It's better at this stage to think about what you are learning to understand and appreciate rather than what you are learning to do. Avoid the trap of letting "how it relates to my major" be the most important or only reason for taking a course. What you plan for or find yourself doing immediately after college may or may not be what eventually captures your "calling" in life. It takes time and experience to arrive at that point. While in college though work on developing the tools that will help you make a good choice when the time does come. Visit the Career Planning Center on campus and do some assessment of your interests. Discover how the world of vocational interests orders itself. Learn some effective career search strategies. Interview people in positions you admire and ask them why they like what they are doing and what contribution they think they are making to life on this earth. Find someone who has changed careers and have a conversation about how they did that and what led to their decisions along the way. Consider doing a summer internship in an area that appeals to you, or shadow someone whose work draws you. Try observing an occupation that you are sure you wouldn't like, and ask yourself why that might not work for you. The three best strategies I know are explore, explore, explore.*

*You might even consider building in a course on career decision making some semester early in your college experience. It might not be immediately apparent to you how such a course will "fit-in" with your studies, and some of your friends might even think it's a waste of time, but it will offer you many important tools you can use when it comes time to make that kind of decision. Whatever the decision, though, remain open to what others are telling you, the gifts they see in you, the possibilities they know. Chances are you will make several different decisions about all this - most students do. Trust yourself in these matters; listen to your own voice; seek advice from those who can help you. Understand that, with every choice - no matter how different, you are moving one step closer to where you should be. There will come a time when you too will recognize where your "heart's deep gladness meets the world's deep hunger," and you will look back and conclude, "I can't imagine ever having done anything else with my life."*

### **Access to Images**

[Powerful mentoring environments . . . offer "images of truth, transformation, positive images of self and of the other, and images of interrelatedness" (Parks, 2000, p. 148). These are images of truth that offer a complete picture, incorporating the "realities of suffering [as well as] the awe of wonder" (p. 151); they are images of transformation that distill a "hope for renewing the world"; they are affirming images of self "that convey a faithful correspondence between [one's] own aspirations and positive reflection in the eyes of another whom [one] values and trusts" (p. 151); they include "images of the other as both similar and unique" and "images of interrelatedness and wholeness" about "institutions that work" (p. 151).]

---

*Some of my favorite moments as a parent occurred in the evenings, shortly before bedtime, when Mom or I would read you a story, while curled on our lap, your hair still damp from a warm bath. You always had your favorite books, mostly because of how they lifted your spirit and sent it soaring wildly through the universe. Your eyes would grow big, your breathing intent, and your tiny voice would pitch to a high squeal at your favorite moments, when it became clear to you that the world always begins with what you imagine it to be. The Big Bad Wolf was oh so scary and the Beautiful Fairy Princess so gracious and magical. Even the Cat in the Hat invited you to play with words and images at first unbelievable. You found friends in these volumes; you saw how some things worked and others didn't, and you learned in their pages and pictures what it meant to be "good," "honest," "anxious," "faithful," "sad," "caring," "frightened," "fair," "helpful," "creative," "loyal," "confused," and "loving." These were the first images that shaped your experiences of goodness and truth.*

*College will work much the same; like before, some days you'll appear in pajamas and wet hair, but the images will come instead from Homer, Faulkner, Machiavelli, DuBois, Jefferson, Dostoevsky, Friedan, Darwin, Picasso, Sartre, Dewey, Thompson, Baldwin, Mozart, Marx, and Wright, to honor just a few. Hold them up, admire them, savor them, claim them, explain them to others, and revisit them often. Some will be just as scary and some just as beautiful. Enjoy them all.*

*Become a list maker - best books, powerful ideas, greatest leaders, finest images, lasting impressions, inspiring qualities, uplifting sounds, admired traits, and genuine characters. Just as you see others, so others see you. Listen for their impressions, those that ring true, and those that affirm. Your experiences will teach you about what is; your mistakes will help you see what should be; and your aspirations will tell you about what could be. Sift and sort until the whole of it is reliable and true for you.*

### **Communities of Practice**

[Mentoring environments engage in the "practices of hearth, table, and commons" (Parks, 2000, p. 154). Hearth includes spaces where individuals are "warmed in both body and soul, are made comfortable, and tend to linger." Such places "invite pause, reflection, and conversation" (p. 154). The practice of table works in similar ways: "In every culture, human beings have eaten together" (Parks, 2000, p. 156). "The practice of the table prepares us for *civitas* . . . we learn to share, to wait, to accommodate, to be grateful. . . . we learn delayed gratification, belonging, commitment, and ritual" (p. 156). Above all though, the table like the hearth is a place of dialogue and conversation, where dreams are shared and images are explored among peers and mentors. Last, the practice of commons affords opportunities of "interrelatedness, belonging, and learning how to stand - and stand with - each other over time" (p. 156). Such places "confirm a common, connected life, and in common with various forms of story and ritual, it can become the center of shared faith and grounded hope" (p. 157).]

*While you were growing up it was often that I would see you spread-legged on the family room floor with one of two-dozen albums from the shelf perched on your lap as you scanned page after page of memories framed in four-by-six stills. I believe what you saw in those photos is that, more than average, your life has been blessed with many traditions and practices of this*

---

sort. Sunday services and holiday gatherings at Grandma Mom's, family reunions on a hot July day, long afternoons at the Iowa farm kitchen table, dress-up dinners and casual picnics, Thanksgiving meal prayers and long commencement speeches, crackling campfires and glowing home hearth logs, all have taught you well what it means to spend time together with the ones you love.

When you get to college, Clare, think about how these same practices might serve to create new albums of experiences for you and your friends. Host a potluck, meet regularly for dinner with your roommate, enjoy hot tea and conversation with someone you like, hang-out with the "group" now and then in the Union, dress-up and go out to eat occasionally with a few special friends, and visit us when you'd like a little popcorn, movie, and a toasty fireplace. Organize a group to go barn dancing, attend an athletic event to cheer-on your team, and sit in the front row of a controversial lecture. Start a book club, join a knitting circle, share your musical talents, and volunteer to be a tutor. There will be times when the college experience will seem very much a solo-journey; practicing hearth, table, and commons will remind you that college includes the presence and support of others who share your path, your hopes, and your dreams. Bring them into your circle often, linger with them, and enjoy what they have to say. Be present to them as well, knowing that you connect them to a sense of "we," just as they do for you.

It's almost time to send you on your way, Clare. Just in case, though, my dad hat will remain atop for a while. I suppose it will always be within reach some way or another. Enjoy the coming years. Give them your best, as you always do. Call home sometime and tell us how much you miss us; we'll do the same for you. Email us a paper now and then so we can read what's on your mind. Stop by with a friend occasionally and introduce us to your growing circle. Take these ideas to heart and know that when I ask you about the barbecue you'll understand. I wish you all the excitement, joy, challenge, and success I know this experience will bring.

Much love,

Dad

## References

- Levinson, D. J., & Levinson, J. D. (1996). *The seasons of a woman's life*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Parks, S. D. (2000). *Big questions worthy dreams: Mentoring young adults in their search for meaning, purpose, and faith*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Strange, C. (2000). Spirituality at state: Private journeys and public visions. *Journal of College and Character*. [on-line] [<http://collegevalues.org/articles.cfm?a=1&id=134>].
-