Twenty Acres: Events That Transform Us

Table of Contents

Preface
1 Introduction: On Re-enlightening Frank Lloyd Wright
2 1961: Oak Park, Illinois
3 1977: Chicago, A Professor
An Aside: On Becoming a Professor
4 1982: Madison
5 1993: House
Conclusion
Preface

I didn’t know land had stories to tell till I was nearly 50 – I had grown up as a grid kid. Although born in Manhattan – no, not that one – Manhattan, Illinois, a rural hamlet a few miles south of Joliet, my earliest memories are of Chicago suburbs, first Elmwood Park and then Oak Park, a prosperous residential village just west of the city, where my family moved in 1949. I was in second grade.

For the next four decades, I trotted around from Evanston to Baltimore, to London and back to Chicago via Elizabeth, New Jersey and Peterborough, Ontario. I mention this sequence of urban stops only to highlight the fact that until in my late 40s, life for me was geographically and emotionally circumscribed by block-by-block grids. I lived on blocks, in towns and cities, in places that were conceived and planned along the logic of the grid. My world, without knowing it, was a visual drawing of squares and assorted rectangles on which houses and buildings were placed. Aside from the roads that made turns and the occasional empty lot, physical, geographic life, my planet, was lived on the block. Developed and geometric.

Yet here I was in my mind's eye remembering 1984 while standing at the ripe age of 73 at the northeast corner of a 20-acre parcel of land my in-laws had severed from a farmstead they owned at the eastern edge of Orfordville, Wisconsin.
For them it was an overgrown woodlot full of invasive locusts, buckthorn, slippery elm, and, what my wife, Nancy, and I eventually came to discover and identify, a curiously invasive plant called garlic mustard, which back in the 1860s had arrived from central Europe via New England as a culinary herb. Unfortunately for us, the settlers who brought the stuff neglected to pack with it the European weevils that nature's plan had invited to keep this most aggressive plant, in check. Now over a century later, dear garlic mustard not only grows on every continent on earth except Antarctica; according to the Nature Conversancy, it expands at the rate of 6,400 square kilometers a year, an area 10 times the size of Toronto, and came to overwhelm our charming little parcel in Orfordville, Wisconsin.

It was on this unwanted wasteland that my wife's parents back in 1967 planted hundreds of walnuts in a great horseshoe in several rows interspersed with pines meant to force the walnuts' upward growth. Destined to be cut as Christmas trees, the fate of these pines was spared by neglect. Today these walnuts are nearly a foot in girth and over 20' in height. As are many of the pines that are still living.

They planted these walnuts at the back of the farm fronted by a magnificent Greek revival farmhouse dating to 1846 before the time Wisconsin became a state in 1848. The support timbers in the basement were tree trunks; the exterior walls were white oak 2” x 10”s – five times the dimensions of today's nominal 2” x 4”s – and insulated with wool; the floors were walnut and red maple; the rest of the trim, including the central stair railing, was walnut; the foundation was local limestone. The two-story structure featured ten-foot high ceilings on both floors. All the wool and trees used in construction were locally harvested; the oak construction timbers were hauled 90 miles by horse over corduroy log roads to Milwaukee where they were
milled and then hauled back. I am still in awe thinking about this. So, why am I reciting these construction details?

Why? I began asking myself. Why is this so important? It was deep in the horseshoe amidst these walnuts that this land first became more for me than a wasteland of unwanted farmland. I was first introduced to the horseshoe in the summer of 1977 by my in-laws, and it was then, at that moment, that I was transported to a serenely quiet bucolic world where filtered sunlight and light wind wafted through the canopy of vibrant young trees. I was never the same.

I quickly lost all sense of time and place – I was in what some may call “flow,” a condition the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi famously coined, a single-minded immersion deeply engaged in nothing but an activity with no sense of time or place, self or emotions.

Though I was yet to uncover the character of the land and my relation to it, this portentous moment was a transformative event fueled by this moment of flow. This led me to learn a central truth about my life, one of the great revelations that follow chronologically from a memory of a moment of flow, a phenomenon we all experience and which I have come to call our downstream. My experience had re-enlightened the land that I now knew in a wave of different ways. As I recast my memory upstream to where I first saw things, lived things, knew them, and revisited moments of flow, the transformation of self knowledge, the downstream, deepened.

That movement of back and forth, upstream and downstream, passing through moments of flow – a phenomenon that I have come to believe is universal if you chose to observe it within yourself – is the subject of this set of narratives and critical essays which span four decades of
experience. For me, the land came to merge the personal with the academic, the architectural with the spiritual.

Everything I knew and experienced, and all that I fetched upstream and discovered downstream is embodied in the design and construction of a Japanese teahouse that my family and I ultimately built on this overgrown woodlot. Everything I know is to be found in this experience with my twenty acres. Every reader has her or his twenty acres somewhere in the past which is ready for fresh contemplation. Welcome to the teahouse.

Introduction: On the Re-Enlightenment of Frank Lloyd Wright

Attending my 50-year Oak Park River Forest, Illinois, High School reunion in 2011, I already knew – and savored – the curious fact that the town's very own world-famous writer Ernest Hemingway had received a D in English within these same walls. It was Hemingway who had described our mainly Protestant and white upper-middle class suburban town as suffering from "wide lawns and narrow minds." The implications of both the geometry and the world-view of this observation has continued to serve as a building block upon which other local truths have been built, on upon which my own life and career has sprouted from.

Frank Lloyd Wright was also from our town. I can construct with perfect clarity in my mind's eye his home and studio, and above all his Prairie-style Unity temple, now the Unitarian-Universalist church. As early as 1954, I recall standing as a kid inside Wright's half-built Frederick house in
nearby Barrington; my parents and the owners had been close friends, and we were invited to see the architect's vision take form. Wright's presence ruminated.

But the celebrated icon of architecture only really became part of the official memory of Oak Park much later, a development that struck me when I returned to the village on 2011 for my 50-year high school class reunion. His buildings had been there for nearly 100 years – I walked past several on my walk to and from high school – but now they were celebrated and provided a major tourist destination to endless and countless visitors. Oak Park had re-enlightened him.

The celebrated icon of architecture only really became part of the official memory of Oak Park after I graduated from high school. Busloads of international visitors would eventually tour his homes on Forest Avenue. His home and studio became a gift shop and tourist center, and signs were put up throughout town to mark the sites. This process of hagiography came to canonize Frank Lloyd Wright as Oak Park legacy. And we conveniently forgot, or let fade, the memory of the local genius whose reputation had in its day been marred by other events. History neglects that Wright had been ostracized for having abandoned his wife and their six children and running off to Europe with Mamah Cheney, the wife of one of his clients. This clash of contradictory forms of reputation regularly haunts me as I recall the walk I took every morning and every afternoon past the Cheney house to and from the high school. I have a 1909 vintage Oak Park post card that enshrines the house and studio that would become Wright's labeled only as "The House Built Around a Tree." There is no mention of Wright though by then he would have completed over 50 local projects and built many of his signature Prairie Houses in Oak Park. His name though has been banished from this postcard, and the reasons are telling.
Wright's acts of inappropriate conduct earned him the status of pariah on the front page of the Chicago Tribune and succeeded in killing his Oak Park architecture practice. He left town, returned to Wisconsin, where he was born, and with Italy still in mind built his historically noted villa Taliesin in Spring Green, Wisconsin.

Wright’s abandoned wife Catherine used to say that she "kept" the Oak Park house and studio, as opposed to preserving or conserving it, which would have indicated some lingering traces of affection, but since the house and studio was all that Wright left her after disappearing in 1911, the place for her was marred with bitterness. She refused her husband a divorce because she knew that Wright would never pay alimony and child support. Indeed, townsfolk knew too that this was the guy who not only abandoned his family but also left them with an unpaid grocery bill of over $900. That would represent more than $20,000 today. For Catherine the house and studio had nothing to do with Wright's legacy; she hung on to it because it was her only asset, finally selling it for a song in 1930 when she remarried. By the 1960s, it was in serious disrepair and if not for a local builder Tuscher Roofing Company this important historical landscape would have crumbled into oblivion. Tuscher
took control of the property in 1974 and started a 13-year restoration (and reinforcing the common wisdom that fixing up a Wright building starts with the roof).

The grounds for Wright’s canonization shifted rapidly. Wright’s house and studio were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972 and declared a National Historic Landmark four years later. It was during these years that the house and studio became the Home and Studio. This time marked the re-enlightenment of Wright's rehabilitation in Oak Park.

In the early 1900s, after Wright took up with Mamah Cheney, Oak Parkers, even former acquaintances, would cross the street rather than say hi and acknowledge him. As a prosperous bedroom suburb, Oak Park in its early days was inhospitable to Bohemian mores. Even alcohol was shunned until 1973, when restaurants and hotels were finally licensed to serve wine; it was not until 2002 that select grocery stores were allowed to sell liquor other than beer and wine. Our current views of Wright as great architect are accurate, but in what is typical of a part of our larger culture omits any memory of the man's personal failings. In the early 1900s, the social constructs were not like that; in the early 1900s, Wright was Oak Park's bête noir.

By revisiting our cultural, intellectual, and moral beliefs as they relate to the underpinnings of our social understanding of contemporary life -- both societal and personal-- we come to see that we live according to truths that are momentarily convenient – or, in the end, simply inconvenient. As a high school graduate from Oak Park, Illinois, and later as a teacher and scholar, and now as a professor emeritus and author I have grown increasingly conscious of this phenomenon. The greater beliefs that I live with – that we all live with – are the very ones we need to splay on the dissection table in order to deepen our understanding of our own psychic and social evolution. Frank Lloyd Wright, the early icon of my youth, and the fixture by which I came to judge truth, has kindly lent himself to this study.
Oak Park Re-DisCOVERS Frank Lloyd Wright

Wright died April 9, 1959; ironically his wife Catherine died only two weeks earlier at the end of March. At the time, I was a sophomore in high school. I suspect, like me, few of my classmates then noticed or now remember that day. Indeed, Wright’s sudden passing, 50 years after he left Oak Park found our community largely unresponsive. The old timers who had been around to know Wright’s scandals first hand were mainly gone, and only a few admirers who had actually known him were still living in Oak Park. And so rather than publishing an obituary immediately, the local newspaper, Oak Leaves, noted Wright’s death on Thursday, April 16, 1959, in an article titled “1888-1916.” The article was written by Leith Scott, who knew Wright personally and had interviewed him on several occasions, recounting his career mainly in Oak Park. The title dates “1888-1916” are partly mysterious since Wright was born in 1867 and died in 1959. 1888 is the year Wright moved to Oak Park and started his first family; 1916 is unexplained. Wright left Oak Park for Europe in 1909 with Mameh. Upon returning in 1910, they left Oak Park for good moving to Spring Green to build Taliesin in 1911 (he called leaving Oak Park “voluntary exile”), though several of his associates notably including Marion Mahoney Griffin, continued what she called the “Chicago group” traditions. 1916 is a date sometimes cited for the end of this period (e.g., Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, Frank Lloyd Wright: Complete Works, Vol. 1, 1885-1916, Taschen), which is often called the “Prairie School,” though this descriptor was coined by H. Allen Brook only in 1972 (The Prairie School: Frank Lloyd Wright and his Midwest Contemporaries (University of Toronto Press) at the same time that the home and studio became the Home and Studio.
Following Taylor’s Rule\(^1\) asserting that two generations, in this case starting in 1888 when Wright moved to Oak Park, must pass before public recognition can occur, it took yet another week in 1959 for the community newspaper to finally publish an official obituary. Titled “A Great Villager,” it started tepidly: “These villages, like any community, are what they are because of the influences of individuals, past and present.” It is the next-to-closing line that probably best captures the tipping point when Oak Park and River Forest could accept Wright’s eccentricities while starting to celebrate his towering contributions to the local community as well as to art and architectulture internationally: “But all of us can mourn his death, remembering his brilliance and making allowance for his human weaknesses.” And to think, those of us still in high school were there for this moment. Little did we know.

So history, it would seem, can indeed be changed. The events, the houses, the community were all there, and there's nothing we can do to change these "facts." But change history we do as we engage these events and individuals in the context of contemporary circumstances as we look back to a past we never experienced. An individual once viewed as blighted can become recognized as a genius or a “man about town” (or both), and it's a few contemporaries and others that follow who pull it off.

Oak Park's rediscovery and rehabilitation – re-enlightenment – of Wright happened long after the 1930s when in the 1970s and '80s enough people who detested him had left the scene and a few, mainly from beyond Oak Park, rediscovered, discovered, and celebrated his work. It was later generations who fixed “the way it was,” reconfiguring current understandings. Gary Taylor (\textit{Cultural Selection}, 1996) tells us that history is ultimately “not what was done but what is passed on” (p. 89).

We best understand history not as “facts”—fulsomely footnoted and commonly shared—but rather as personal and official narratives, rooted in the present, not the past. History is as much about what the storytellers tell as what or who the stories are about. Wright’s homes in Oak Park have been there since they were built, but by process of “re-enlightenment,” their status and currency have been revised by the community for its residents and endless tourists. Memory, both personal and community, is organic, morphing over time.

History seemed to repeat itself when Wright moved to Wisconsin where he was arrested for "crossing the state border for illicit activity" (he went to Minnesota with Mamah). He made things worse when he announced to local reporters in Spring Green that he was a genius who played by rules different from the strictures of ordinary people.

Perhaps the most recent example of this re-enlightenment is Monona Terrace in Madison, which Wright designed in 1938 when the City Council rejected his proposal by a single vote, but was not built until 1998, four decades after his death and six decades after his original proposal. In the ’30s, the city council vilified him and his proposal; in the 1959, the state legislature passed a zoning ordinance prohibiting the construction of any buildings along Lake Monona higher than 20 feet, a regulation motivated solely to stop construction of Monona Terrace. It was only in 1997 that Madison finally resolved to build the Monona Terrace and Conference Center. Tommy Thomson, Wisconsin’s pro-business Republican governor at the time, became a vigorous Wright supporter after he returned from a trip to Japan where he learned that Wright was Wisconsin's person most highly regarded there. In other words, he was good for Wisconsin business in Asia. The proposal to build Monona Terrace in 1998 was completely bipartisan with support from the governor to the city council to the state legislature to the mayor of Madison at the time, Paul Soglin, a "radical" student at the UW-Madison at the time of the notorious Vietnam protests when two protestors had bombed the math building.
I have, as you can see, followed all this with great interest from my days growing up in Oak Park to my time now in Madison, but I didn't always see it as I do now. In a way, I've followed Wright around, not Wright himself but rather his identity; I have re-enlightened him over this period. In high school in the late 1950s, like most of my classmates, I was aware of Wright and could point out many of his buildings. But my regard and understanding of him changed; I now regard him clearly as America's greatest architect. In 1997, one of his apprentices, Charles Montooth, designed a beautiful home for us, and Montooth’s own apprentice, Paul Kardatsky designed the Japanese-inspired teahouse cottage we actually built.
I have an enormous collection of books by, on, and about Wright – their publication never ends, and they all appreciate in value; there's now a historical "mystery novel," *Death in a Prairie House*, a best selling novel, *Loving Frank*, and even an opera, *Shining Brow*. When I travel on business around the country, I make sure to include tours or drive-bys of Wright homes. So I suppose I'm sort of expert on Wright, but it's as much about my own personal journey as it is about Wright’s memory; it's a fascinating narrative about the development of my understanding of Wright’s architecture (and my own sensibilities).

*Memoirs of a Geisha*, published in 1997, usefully delineates the time and place of Wright's Japanese tours (it's from the time he bought Hiroshigi woodblock prints for pennies and then sold them for thousands of dollars in the US; they were his main source of income during the 1920s, when he could barely scare up commissions here) and work there (e.g., the Imperial Hotel in Tokyo). Japan in the 1920s and '30s was where Wright got familiar with 5'9" high doors, much to the eventual chagrin of his American clients. Japan is where Wright advanced his work with cantilevers and learned the spirituality of horizontal lines. Japan is where he learned to trim roof facia with dentals. Wright stole a lot from Japan (Picasso once said good artists borrow, great artists steal – Wright was one of the great ones) but barely mentioned it beyond his general admiration for Japanese aesthetics and the Hiroshigi woodblocks he hawked.

*River Forest Women's Club, William Drummond, 1913*
In 1961, the day before I went off to college at Northwestern, I gave a cello recital at the River Forest Women's Club, which was designed in 1913 by William Drummond, who had previously served as Wright's chief draftsman. I recently went back to see it. It's now a private home, and it couldn't be more Wright-like (even if it’s now painted green). But in 1961, for me, it was just a place I gave my recital; it had been there since around the turn of the century. But it wasn't until a recent visit that I noted all the Wright influences – banded casement windows with extended eave, the dramatic opening from the constrained space of a small lobby into the auditorium. It was a duh moment – it had been there for 60 years; I played a recital there in 1961, but didn't understood Wright's clear influence until 35 years later. Amazing. Re-enlightenment.

On the History of Frank Lloyd Wright

So just what is the history of Frank Lloyd Wright? How did an untrained architect originally from rural Wisconsin and shamed by his suburban Chicago clients become known as the world’s greatest architect? Clearly this history is complicated and has been told in many variations with endless revisions. After he returned from Europe with Mamah Cheney in 1909, any account would have been local in the form of gossip as well as highly inflammatory newspaper front page stories. His 1959 obituary perhaps marks a tipping point in his reputation, and by the 1970s, his homes and career were celebrated as events marked by long lines of visitors and tourists at his Oak Park Home and Studio. Yet by the 1990s, three decades after his death, he was the object of unique hagiography in opera, drama, and novel. Together these events compose multiple and successive accounts of Wright’s career with each history refracting the understandings of their times. Starting with gossip in Oak Park and Spring Green and culminating in celebratory work,
accounts of Wright have their own histories which track the history of the architect himself. In this sense, tracking Wright’s numerous re-enlightenments constitutes more than a history. It is indeed a dynamic history of histories.

One might argue that these changes are but “chapters” in Wright’s biography, a common tack of biographers, but because they mark transformative events, they are better understood as re-enlightenments. Our vision of Wright has changed over the course of his life and beyond.

Put simply, such re-enlightenments focus transformative events, such as Wright’s scandal forcing him to abandon his practice in Oak Park or, his subsequent death in 1959 when enough outraged villagers had died and his architecture continued to gain recognition, or his recognition by the New York City Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, the final restating place of his drawings and models. The Avery in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) produced a major exhibition on his work, *Frank Lloyd Wright at 150: Unpacking the Archive*, June 12–October 1, 2017 at the Museum of Modern Art. Each re-enlightenment shapes both a “downstream” and “upstream.” The downstream has to do with the consequences of the event, including recollections, stories, commemoratives, documentaries, legends, gossip, and awards. The upstream, always constructed after the transformative event, includes histories, the recognition of certain events as seminal and individuals as pioneers in their fields, the formation of schools and miscellaneous -isms. Ironically in each case, the upstream, even if meticulously supported by a record, is constructed downstream as a memorial to what is remembered. In this mix, the transformative event is primary, both defining and configuring upstreams and downstreams.

Wright’s career clearly reveals that history is not fixed and dug up in archives, as sometimes believed. Over time, the story of Frank Lloyd Wright shifted significantly. In his
example we can see that history is a dynamic narrative continuously re-enlightened, revised by contemporary events, leaving behind a trail of multiple histories. Each of these accounts re-enlightened Wright in the eyes of the public, each recasting both a downstream (personally scandalous when he returned to the United States with his client’s wife, architecturally heroic by the time of Fallingwater) and an upstream addressing its foundation at each turn.
Chicago: A Professor

At the end of summer 1977, my wife and I moved to Chicago – back to the grid – where I was a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago (then Chicago Circle), and for the next several years we enjoyed weekends each summer at the farmhouse. The state department of tourism's slogan at the time, “Escape to Wisconsin,” aptly captured our mood and eager anticipation as we defied urban traffic for our increasingly frequent treks north. Our two cats suddenly came to life from their back-seat slumber as soon as we were a mile from the farm (and the scent of a few good barn rats). During our time there, we breakfasted in a Brodhead cafe, and I spent time exploring the woodlot and scrub bush at the back of the farm.
This patch of land, left over from the sale of the front acreage farm land, was shaped as a pan handle with a 70-foot wide access strip stretching several hundred feet from a township road to the main plot of land. This 2-acre pan handle had been tilled and farmed until my in-laws included it with the woodlot when most of the tillable land was sold in 1984.

It is impossible to even imagine how barren this land was at first once it was left untilled. It is even harder to imagine the clamorous pace nature took the next year infesting it with weeds, shrubs, and various trees – especially black locust, buck thorn, cherry, and slippery elm – which all went to work repopulating it. By the next spring, it was dense with weeds, and within a few years, garlic mustard invaded, seducing us with its first-year crop of what seemed to be a generous ground cover of violets. Because garlic mustard is a biennial, however, its potential devastation was revealed with the second-year plants blooming on 2-3’ stalks. Each plant contained thousands of seeds which could remain viable in the soil seed bank for up to 10 years.
By the time my wife and I were up to speed on this invidious invasive, which was equipped and well prepared to displace any native wildflowers in its destructive path, we were facing an infestation that could only be measured in acres. We became Roundup-armed specialists spraying gallons of herbicide. In one part of our woodlot, I recall the garlic mustard reached 5′ in height, no doubt fertilized by run off from the adjoining farm. It was indeed so high and thickly crowded that my Roundup spray damaged – barely dented – only the tops of the plants. The rest survived and had to be cut and removed before herbicide could be sprayed to reach and kill the roots. I actually sought counseling with a psychologist to deal with my garlic mustard problem, made worse by the fact that the intensive patch of land I was treating actually belonged to the adjoining farm. With the farmer’s permission to control weeds there, I spent more than $1,000 to create a unique woodland copse and nearly succeeded until the farmer changed his mind and fenced us and our wild flowers out.

That summer I also spent time with my weed wacker arduously carving a path through the pan handle of the property into the woodland. I didn’t realize it at the time, but choosing the path of least resistance, I was following a process, as with so many roads, first opened by deer. And of course they followed me in a mutually beneficial enterprise helping to keep the path open.

When I was not battling weeds, I was editing a collection of research papers for my a published book. In the acknowledgments, I wrote, “Much of my own writing was done in the calm and serenity of the Craven Farmstead in Plymouth Township, Wisconsin.” Before it was the Craven farm, it was the Smiley farm, named for the builder, my wife's great, great grandfather.
The book I worked on was *What Writers Know: The Language, Process, and Structure of Written Discourse*, published by Academic Press in 1982, and it was among the first of several books from that time reporting empirical research on writing. Unlike most books on writing, these new books were unconstrained by any requirements to deal with instruction.

This research was largely fueled by new energy in the cognitive sciences, which had moved beyond treatises on mind to deal with cognitive processes including initially reading and subsequently writing.

In my own chapter in the book, “The Structure of Textual Space,”\(^2\) I sketched a model of writing as a writer's joint participation with readers in “textual space.” I began with the observation that

*If I board a train in Lisbon and overhear a conversation, I will not understand it.*

*For me this talk is impenetrable. If I board a train in Chicago or London, however, I may well find myself absorbed in the conversation of others – even if I do not mean to listen. If the conversation intrigues me, only such radical action as change of seat or departure from the train can PREVENT my silent participation in this talk. I cannot understand talk in Lisbon even if I need to, whereas in Chicago I am an unwitting participant even if I mean not to be.*

*In Lisbon, speakers share a certain space from which I am effectively excluded. Though not material or physical, this space is quite real, as my exclusion from the*
conversation clearly shows. The space is textual; and to move around and get on in it, one clearly needs to know its rules and distinctive features.³

This conceptualization of written communication as an interactive affair echoed my experience amidst the walnuts. Though the trees might be treated individually as when, for example, a tree might be felled, my immersive experience in the woods required me to engage and give myself fully to forces beyond me. From this perspective, a tree falling in my woods could only make a sound if I were around to hear it.

In 1986, I published The Structure of Written Communication: Studies in Reciprocity Between Writers and Readers⁴ fully elaborating my textual space model. Even if writing is a typically solitary, individual activity, its impulse and realization always involve a reader, whether individuals close to the writer (and in the case of private diaries, the writer herself) or others whom the writer may never meet, indeed are not be contemporaries. As Norwegian psychologist Ragnar Rommetveit put it, we “write on the premises of the reader and read on the premises of the writer.”⁵ In a true transformative event, writers and readers meet “on the page” in a “confluence of consciousness occasioned by the writer's expression and reader's comprehension, and made manifest in the text.”⁶ This key assumption is my Reciprocity Principle, which is the foundation of all social acts, including discourse: In any collaborative

---


⁶ Nystrand, 1982, p. 82.
activity the participants orient their actions on certain standards which are taken for granted as
rules of conduct by the social group to which they belong. In learning to collaborate in this
way, the collaborators develop a mutual co-awareness “not only of what the other is doing,
saying and so on, and of what I am doing, but also of how what I am doing appears to the
other, and even what I must do to communicate more clearly.”

In other words, this meaning is dynamic, which is to say, it evolves over the course of
reading. It is not exactly the same from reader to reader or even from reading to reading; and it is
entwined with the cultural and ideational assumptions both writers and their readers bring to the
text. This is not to say that readers completely determine the meaning of the text; instead,
whatever meaning is achieved is a unique configuration and interaction of what both writer and
reader bring to the text. Because meaning is not encoded in the text itself, writers do not achieve
explicitness by saying everything in self-contained texts. The writer’s problem in being explicit
is not saying everything – a sure-fire recipe for being tedious and boring. Indeed, the writer’s
problem is knowing just which points need to be elaborated and which ones can be assumed.
This in turn depends on what readers already know, or more specifically on what the writer and
reader share. Explicitness is consequently not a text phenomenon but rather a social-interactive
or dialogic one.

In any act of written communication, writers and readers meet on the page as readers peer
through the pages, enlightening the text to give it meaning. In acts of writing, writers become
unaware of pen and paper, immersed in textual space, in the meanings they create and re-
enlighten their unfolding texts. In both cases, the physical properties of text are transformed by

---

the very acts of writing and reading. If writers and readers are fluent in the language and familiar with the ideas elaborated by the text, the text is transparent, whereas if they are not, the text is opaque. Not unlike my encounter with the walnuts on that afternoon in 1977, written communication is a transformative experience where individuals lose themselves, in the text rather than walnuts, transported to new domains of enlightenment and understanding.
Upon graduating from Northwestern University with a major in English in 1965, I had two options available to me – pursue either a PhD in literature at the University of Toronto or an M.A.T. (Master of Arts in Teaching) at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. As with Robert Frosts' two diverging paths in a woods, I chose the one least traveled among my fellow students, and it made all the difference – a difference in consequences, both personal and professional and totally inscrutable at the time.

After teaching high school English for five years, I decided to pursue a PhD in English Education, also at Northwestern University. It was at this point that my future was to become only more inscrutable. There were next to no jobs. I did manage to secure a teaching position at Newark State College, paying all my own expenses from Chicago to New Jersey to interview for
the job and back, but my position ended after only two years when the College closed (only to reopen as Kean University several years later). I became an itinerant professor picking up a course here and another there. All until in 1975 when Newsweek published a cover story, “Why Johnny Can't Write.” America was suddenly immersed in a literacy crisis, and colleges and university departments of English were in a national crisis as they sought to address it.

Nearly overnight post-secondary writing programs revived. We tend to think of writing, along with reading and math – the three r's (reading, [w]riting, and [a]rithmetic) – as the curriculum fundamentals that have always formed the foundation of schooling, and while this may be true in some sense in elementary and secondary education, it never was in colleges and universities. The fortunes of writing at post-secondary levels have varied widely over the years. In 19## alone, the University of Illinois closed down Freshman Composition, on the basis that because it was expensive to offer and students who failed it soon dropped out anyway. Wisconsin followed suit in 19##.

Over three centuries, the impetus for post-secondary writing instruction has waxed and waned especially with demographic shifts, benefiting particularly when new economic classes, especially the middle class, enrolled in college. Each shift marked a tipping point in writing instruction. The rise and fall of writing and particularly writing instruction has always correlated its origins and development amidst increases in social mobility and consequential demographic shifts. Indeed, as Schmandt-Besserat shows, this seems to have been the case as long ago as ancient Mesopotamia when in the late fourth millennium BCE, the cuneiform script was invented in the Near East to accommodate a new expanding and expansive commercial class of trading.

---

Other writing systems have developed independently under similar circumstances, including ancient China around 5,000 BC, Sumer (in Mesopotamia) around 3100 BC, and Mesoamerica by 300 BC.

Later in mid- to late-eighteenth century Britain, as Miller shows, instruction in composition and rhetoric first gained traction in provincial colleges, not elite universities like Cambridge and Oxford (where Latin continued as the principal medium of instruction). During this period, an expanding middle class sought self-improvement through writing instruction, buying endless dictionaries and grammar books (and mastering such diktats as Never split infinitive, Never end a sentence with a preposition, It is I not It is me, etc.) as well as eagerly upscaling their working class dialects through enunciation instruction. Dissenters to the Catholic throne and forces behind the Protestant Reformation such as Adam Smith and Joseph Priestley, who were prohibited from teaching at Cambridge and Oxford, took to teaching writing, in English, not Latin. Grammars and dictionaries flourished.

A century later after the American civil war, Charles William Eliot, president of Harvard, led the expansion and modernization of Harvard, transforming it from a college for sons of the landed gentry into a modern university (albeit still only for men) dedicated to the education of middle- as well as upperclass managers in an industrial society – in short, from education serving an agrarian aristocracy to specialized professional preparation for an industrial meritocracy, or an "aristocracy of achievement," to quote Charles William Eliot, president of Harvard in 1869. In this way, the new professional classes of the industrial world were to be given "a quite direct

---

preparation of the work habits and thought patterns that are needed to function in any of the 'varied calls of life.'"\textsuperscript{10}

A century later, first with GIs returning from World War II and then with the Great Society, writing instruction once again expanded; in 1969 America, a new community college opened every week. Coupled with the rise of open admissions in New York in the 1970s, as entire populations of first-generation college students enrolled in college, the demands for widespread writing instruction exploded. Rarely have the problems of the world impacted school and university instructional programs as fully as during the late 1960s when riots torched cities and Vietnam War protests tore at university campuses. The Johnson administration vigorously sought to increase educational opportunities as a key weapon in its War on Poverty, and by the late 1960s, a new community college opened every week. And as in eighteenth-century Britain, these non-elite institutions fueled new approaches to composition.

In the fall of 1970, six months after four Kent State students were shot dead by National Guard troops, CUNY expedited its policy of open admissions, five years ahead of its planned start in 1975: Brooklyn's enrollments jumped from 14,000-34,000 students. The woeful inadequacy of post-secondary institutions and their instructors to meet this challenge prompted new research, notably that of Mina Shaughnessy’s \textit{Errors and Expectations}, published in 1977,\textsuperscript{11} who, influenced by Labov's “The logic of non-standard English,” published in 1969,\textsuperscript{12} sought to show patterns and unconventional patterns in what the critics of the schools saw as so much sloppiness and ignorance. This and much other research, e.g., Flower & Hayes,

1977,\textsuperscript{13} formed the basis for new doctoral programs in composition and rhetoric. Between 1980-1995, these programs grew from only a few to currently dozens generating hundreds of PhDs each year. The story of composition studies is very much fueled by demographic shifts involving the dynamics of a marginalized academic concern involving marginalized students on marginalized campuses, and what happened when they each, in their own way, strove for legitimacy.

This, then, was the context for my career, a context much more substantial, complicated, and enduring than my graduate work and previous employment.

1982 Madison

In 1982 we moved to Madison, WI, where I became a professor of English at the university there. My wife and I, and within a year after the birth of our first son, resumed our picnics and hikes at the woodlot now wonderfully located about 50 miles south of Madison rather than 100 miles from Chicago. I also fell into an autumn ritual of pruning the horseshoe walnuts with a small chain saw purchased at a local Farm and Fleet.

Deep in the woods and lingering on warm golden afternoons and blissfully oblivious to accidents (and in alarming hindsight, with no idea where I might find the nearest emergency room or urgent care center), I was flying blind – I'm not sure I even kept nearby a first aid kit,
and this was (blessedly) in days before cell phones. After several years, I graduated, much to the trees’ benefit, to a pole pruner reaching up 15’.

These autumn bouts pruning trees so happened to correspond with my annual bouts of depression and insomnia, a condition my doctor diagnosed as seasonal affective disorder syndrome, or SADS. With my spirits rising as I took on the trees, I began to think about flow therapeutically, not just as a condition of bliss, but rather as more a productive activity – pruning trees yes but more that I did not yet fully understand.

* * * *

After joining the faculty at Wisconsin, I was also at work on new research projects, this time studying (a) the role of response groups in college expository writing and (b) the role of classroom discourse, i.e., classroom interactions between teachers and students and among students, on student achievement in reading and literature.

**Learning to Write by Talking about Writing**

Arriving at Wisconsin in 1982 to direct the rebuilding of a freshman composition program that had largely been abandoned twenty years earlier, I worked with a few miscellaneous literature professors to develop a new embodiment of a small elective Freshman Expository writing course. This became my opportunity to put into effect my textual space idea of writing as a social-interactive affair requiring writers to write on the premises of the reader and readers to read on the premises of the writer. While this premise undergirds writing in the world beyond school, including newspapers, notes to oneself, and letters of all kinds, it is

---

14 Full details of this study will be found in M. Nystrand. (1986). Learning to write by talking about writing: A summary of research on intensive peer review at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In M. Nystrand, *The Structure of Written Communication: Studies in Reciprocity between Writers and Readers* (pp. 179-212). Orlando and London: Academic Press.
difficult to implement in classrooms where teachers grade papers not based on whether they can understand what students have written but rather on the presence or absence of critical features, including spelling, grammar, usage, and genre features and characteristics. For example, it would be scandalous if teachers were to grade their students’ writing on the extent to which they were persuaded by students’ arguments (“Sorry, I disagree: F” or “Spot on: A”).

Indeed, the very structure of classrooms – one teacher and large classes, in budget stressed high schools as many as 30 students per classroom – compels teachers to teach composition as a subject matter, especially concerning grammar, usage and style. The sheer amount of time teachers must spend reading and marking their students’ papers, mitigates sharply against requiring revisions. Finally, taking into account the fact that students most likely write only for their English teacher (but sometimes also a social studies teachers) means that students not only write little in even the best of classes but they also write to a very limited number of readers, and almost none of their writing is written for the purpose of communication and persuasive argument. In short, Freshman English typically offers a paucity of authentic writing experience.

To rebuild this program, I picked up on one literature professor’s use of writing groups in which students wrote mostly for each other. Students met in groups of 4-5 permanently for the duration of the course. Half of class time was devoted to students sharing their drafts and revisions with each other. Initial drafts were 500-1000 words, and students provided copies of their papers to the others in their groups. Each round of interaction required the author to read their text to their classmates as everyone followed along on their copies of the text. For subsequent sessions, students could either present a revision of a new text.
Attendance was carefully stressed since the absence of even one student missing from a group could reduce group size to 20% or more depending on the size of the group. Students were told the purpose of response groups was to give authors insights into how their papers were working with them. The purpose of the groups was not copy editing: fixing typos, grammar, and usage, not because they were unimportant but because they made lousy topics for discussion; not surprisingly writers often picked up on many of these errors and ideas as they read with pencils in hand their drafts aloud to their group. Instead, we encouraged students to focus on issues such as: What the paper is about? What is it really about? and Are you convinced? Students were to respond not as they might imagine a teacher would and definitely not as “the Reader” (that reified Reader who hovers over school writing but never reads anything) but rather as themselves, as regular readers, individuals who read to understand, not to judge. Students were encouraged to focus their questions about the text – parts they couldn’t follow, potential paths they sensed the writer is heading towards, and where their paths took them (or didn’t). Students were to discuss these problems in terms of their own reading processes – noting spots where they tripped up with comments such as:

- *I didn’t know what you meant by x.*
- *Your paper seems to be about y, but I didn’t see how the first (last) part related to your purpose.*
- *I got lost here, e.g., Who made “the mistake” in the third paragraph?*
- *I’d really like to hear more about …*

Students were encouraged to comment on part of the paper that really work, including words, phrases, images, examples, title, etc. Helpful comments included “*I finally figured it out at the end, but I didn’t see where you were going in the introduction.*”
In all, my study examined 250 essays in thirteen classes over a period of three years; we videotaped five groups twice each (10 hours total over the course of a semester). Using personal essays, both at the beginning and end of the term, we surprisingly found that the quality of writing for students who wrote just for their teacher declined slightly over the course of the semester whereas the quality of writing for students writing for each other improved slightly; the difference was statistically significant. The same was true for editing skills, grammar, and usage.

In addition, we asked students to write brief statements about how they wrote and then used each to determine composing process profiles. Main results were:

- Students writing just for their teachers came to see their readers as judges versus students writing for their groups increasingly came to see their readers as collaborators.
- Students writing just for their teachers came increasingly to see revision as a matter of editing whereas students meeting in groups increasingly saw it as a matter of reconceptualization.
- Students writing for each other developed more positive attitudes towards writing.

Though involving only post-secondary students in an elective course, we submit that this reform of writing instruction carefully identifies problems with traditional writing instruction, located mainly in the role played by readers, whether teachers or students, and sketches the main elements of necessary change.

* * * * * *

In 1984, our involvement with the land changed as my wife's parents had the land surveyed ("5 acres woods and 13 acres wasteland"; the remaining two acres included the access road) and then legally transferred title to 20 acres to her. It was also about this time that our
older son, Steve, applied his gifts as a young 12-year old map maker to mapping the property, drawn solely from his knowledge hiking the land, and noting some of his own unique interests, including “Box Elder trees to be tapped” in the spring.

In 1984 we also hired a local contractor to build us a gravel road running across the northern passageway. I envisioned a straight road running about 20′ south of the northern property line, but at the middle I envisioned a gravel driveway moving in a straight line towards the northeastern corner of the property, imagining understory redbuds and sargent crabs planted at the property line gradually “emerging” from the haze of the weeds as we traversed the road. The contractor argued for sticking with the path pioneered by the deer. This was a great recommendation, one that introduced opportunities for landscaping and tree planting at every curve (see map below). The deer were right.

In 1985 we formally entered into agreement with the state DNR's woodland plan, agreeing to conserve the property as it was in return for inexpensive seedlings and reduced taxes. One acre was formally dedicated to a future home site, which a few years later we began to actively ponder.

* * * * *

Dialogic Instruction: When Recitation Becomes Conversation

About this time, I began a new study examining the role of classroom talk and interaction as they affect reading and literature achievement in middle and high school, starting in 1985 and continuing today, resulting in numerous research publications plus a 1997 book, *Opening Dialogue: Understanding the Dynamics of Language and Learning in the English Classroom.*
In these studies, my colleagues and I discovered that in the hundreds of middle- and secondary English Language Arts and reading classes we studied, open-ended discussion, as well as open-ended questions (which we called authentic teacher questions) were most closely associated with growth in student learning and achievement in reading and literature especially compared to the normal practice of recitation. Yet discussion was rare occurring as little as 15 seconds a day; this oxymoron, a 15-second discussion, is explained by the fact that it was an average for all classes: in the vast number of classes, there was no discussion; in a few there was as much as a few minutes or less. Hence, the most effective form of classroom talk was also rare. And in the last three decades, our studies have revealed, it has only declined as an instructional activity, especially as school accountability pressures have increasingly prescribed tightly formed questions, even to the extent of particular lesson plans. In such instruction, there is little room for activities like open-ended questions and discussion whose results cannot be predicted.

Here are two brief transcripts illustrating these two modes of instruction.

_In her ninth-grade English class, Ms. Lindsay is writing on the board, trying hard to keep up with John, one of her students in this ninth-grade class, who has just read aloud his plot summary for a chapter from Mildred Taylor’s Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry._

“I had a lot of trouble,” says Ms. Lindsay, “getting everything down [on the board], and I think I missed the part about trying to boycott.” She reads from the board: “‘and tries to organize a boycott.’ Did I get everything down, John, that you said?”

“What about the guy who didn’t really think these kids were a pest?” replies John.

“Yeah, okay,” says Ms. Lindsay. “What’s his name? Do you remember?” John shakes his head, indicating he can’t remember.

_Without waiting to be called on, Alicia, another student, volunteers, “Wasn’t it Turner?”_
Looking around the class, Ms. Lindsay says, “Was it Turner?”

Several students say, “Yes.”

“Okay,” continues Ms. Lindsay, “so Mr. Turner resisted white help. Why? Why would he want to keep shopping at that terrible store?”

John quickly answers, “There was only one store to buy from because all the other ones were white.”

“Well,” Ms. Lindsay objects, “the Wall Store was white too.”

Another student, Tom, now addressing John, wonders, “Is it Mr. Hollings’ store? Is that it?”

Re-enlightened, John answers “No.” “Here's the reason. They don't get paid till the cotton comes in. But throughout the year they still have to buy stuff – food, clothes, seed, and stuff like that. So the owner of the plantation will sign for what they buy at the store so that throughout the year they can still buy stuff on credit.”

“So,” Ms. Lindsay says, reading aloud what she puts up on the board: “he has to have credit in order to buy things, and this store is the only one that will give it to him.”

Another student, Felice, speaks up. “I was just going to say, it was the closest store.”

Barely looking away from the board now, Ms. Lindsay replies while continuing to flesh out the paragraph building on the board, “Okay – it’s the closest store; it seems to be in the middle of the area; a lot of sharecroppers who don’t get paid cash – they get credit at that store – and it’s very hard to get credit at other stores. So it’s going to be very hard for her to organize that boycott; she needs to exist on credit.

“Yeah?” she says as she then nods to yet another student. Discussion continues.

Over the three decades that my colleagues and I visited hundreds of eighth- and ninth-grade literature classrooms, this brief excerpt of classroom discourse came to represent the most important qualities of instruction we found that works – instruction that helps students understand literature in depth, helps them remember it and relate to it in terms of their own
experience, and – most important for literature instruction – respond to it aesthetically, going beyond the who, what, when, and why of nonfiction and literal comprehension. In this classroom, students were engaged, not merely “on task.” Unlike most, this class was not about the transmission and recitation of information, and the teacher’s role was not that of asking questions to see how much students knew and to go over the points they did not yet understand. This session was transformative; it was about figuring things out – in class, face-to-face, teacher and students together.

Here traditional teacher and learner roles were often reversed. Rather than lecturing or quizzing students about the main points, this teacher instead took notes from them about their ideas. There was no penalty for error in this class; feigning a lapse, the teacher allowed a student to help her with a character’s name. In this class, students as well as the teacher asked key questions, and in the end, it was the students, not the teacher, who explained the main point.

By contrast, most instruction in America is about what is already known and figured out. Indeed, learning and being prepared for class typically mean reliably remembering what is already known. But this class went further, and instruction here was ultimately about working collaboratively to understand what was not yet understood. Clearly this teacher not only took her students seriously, but in addition they knew it. Instruction of this sort is described inadequately by the main points in a lesson plan. Capturing instruction and learning of this sort requires constructing a narrative of unfolding understandings involving thoughtful interaction between and among teacher and students.

---

Here is a brief transcript from a lesson organized as recitation in which Mr. Schmidt, another teacher, reviews main points about *The Iliad* so that his ninth-grade students will have some basic understanding of plot, setting, and narrative.

“According to the poet,” Mr. Schmidt asks, “what is the subject of *The Iliad*?”

“Where does the action of the first part of ‘Book 1’ take place when we enter the story?”

“Well,” he says, “they're not on their ships. Let’s see if we can kind of visualize where everything is here.” He proceeds to draw on the board. “Remember that Troy is on the coast of Turkey – at the time called Asia Minor – so let's see if we can – okay – this is the scene, and all of the ships are anchored – a thousand ships are anchored here – Helen, the face that launched a thousand ships. So they are on the shore here, and this is the plains of Troy, a great city, and here's Troy, the great walled city. There's a big gate here. Now this is quite a few miles; it's a large plain. And the wall surrounds the city, and inside the city there are farms and whatever there is. The city can exist for a long time without ever having to go out. And periodically the Trojans come out and engage the Acheans in battle. And at the end of the day, they go back home. They can't fight at night – they can't see anything; it's too dark. What's the point – you might be killing one of your friends – it's hard to tell one man from another. And very often if the Trojans don't feel like coming out to fight, they don't . . . . So the war has been going on now for how long?”

“What's the story behind the quarrel – it deals with Achilles and Briseis and Agamemnon and Chryses and Chryses' daughter Chryseis and how Agamemnon takes Chryseis away from Achilles to replace the prize Chryseis, who has gone back to her father. What is the result of the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles?”

“What's the common custom of Greek warfare and prizes?”

“What is Achilles' heritage?” he asks. “How does he use that power?”

“How does he use the power that his mother is goddess?”

“What is the relationship between gods and men in *The Iliad*?

“Okay, what else? What are some other parts of this relationship?”

“Okay, what else? Do gods intervene in human affairs?”
The transcript here does not include student answers. But in truth, this is not a huge loss. Student responses are mainly brief answers volunteered as questions, e.g., “On the Achean ship?” “Was it on the shore?” etc. One gets the impression that the teacher might reorder the questions and is working from a list of questions he has used numerous times in the past when he has taught, i.e., covered, The Iliad. Student responses do not alter the course of the questions; the only aim is to get the right answers. And when they do, Mr. Schmidt goes on to his next question, which may well abruptly change the focus of the exchange.

What is most striking about this recitation is the extent to which the teacher controls the discourse. Though the term “recitation” usually refers to students' oral presentation of previously learned material, this excerpt demonstrates how completely the teacher can do the actual reciting. The students play a minor and supporting role in what gets said here, mainly by responding with an occasional word or two to the teacher's periodic questions. Not always knowing if their responses will be acceptable, they frequently hesitate; they develop no ideas of their own; they do a lot of guessing. This is a tightly scripted lesson; we get the impression that the teacher is working from a highly wrought list of topics and questions, covering particular points in a particular order (and perhaps preparing students for a test); that he has done so in the past and will do so again in the future; and that the makeup of each class affects the script very little. There interaction here between teacher and students is more minimal and procedural than substantive.

Recitation is a unique 3-part discourse found mainly in school (and the occasional middleclass dinner table at home) in which the teacher (a) asks a known-answer question, (b) solicits a student response (frequently with a question-like raised pitch), followed by (c) the teacher’s evaluation. It is by far the predominant mode of classroom discourse in American
secondary schools, where it has been an idiosyncratic part of schooling for well over a century. In a 1908 study contrasting American and European pedagogy, Burstall found that European teachers mainly used lecture to “build up new knowledge in class” whereas American teachers, more focused on textbooks, tended to serve as “chairm[e]n of a meeting, the object of which is to ascertain whether [students] have studied for themselves in a textbook”16 The Americans prided themselves on their belief that recitations were more “democratic” than lectures because they potentially gave every student a chance to participate in lessons.

So why is open-ended discussion rare and recitation common? Open-ended discussion is rare because teachers cannot predict what students will say and because prescribed lesson content may not get covered. In other words, starting a discussion presents a risk to teachers and is particularly problematic for new teachers who may not know how to respond to student comments or indeed when not to respond in order to encourage other students to chime in with their own ideas.

The full-fledged fabric of a discussion is intricate, probably not repeatable (unlike Mr. Schmidt’s list of questions), with teacher and students in dialog with each other. This co-dependency of participants echoed what I was learning at the woods as I learned about the structure of plant colonies and, following the principles of Wright’s organic architecture, we shall see in the next chapter, the importance of buildings in dialog with their surroundings.

Teahouse

The story our land had to tell us gradually revealed itself to us as we explored along the half-mile northern edge of our property. The first part of the trek from Carver Road to the house site moves through woods to the north and fields to the south. Then it becomes all woods as we move up a gentle slope before encountering the northeast corner of the property. Here – at the highest point of the property – the view to the north opens completely onto farmed fields and gently rolling hills all the way to the horizon. And here the site finally unloads it secrets: Eighty feet to the south is a large wild plum grove. Beyond that and extending southwest is a large meadow of Queen Anne’s lace, wild bergamot, wild parsnip, and other wild flowers and grasses. These are the chief story elements the land has to tell us here.
In 1993, our relation to the land progressed to a new level when we had papers drawn up assigning joint ownership to my wife and me. The same year, we hired a contractor to transform our hiking trails (as well as the deer's) into a gravel road. When we started this road, our general idea was something that moved from our Carver Road access to the northeast corner of the property, about a half mile east. By this time, I had begun to whack a path through the weeds to the midpoint. At some point I realized that I had deer companions who followed me helping by munching on the weeds I was dispatching. I didn't realize it, but the path was a collaborative effort.

Once we hired a contractor to finish the path to the northeast corner, my wife and I had already begun contemplating the construction of a house at the end. At the same time we began to school ourselves on landscaping. My idea was to finish our road as a straight line starting midpoint across the property about 50 feet south of our property line and, gradually moving north and terminating at the house site. At the same time I would plant understory trees (serviceberries and redbuds) between the road and the property line so that in traversing the road the trees, and their color, would become increasingly distinct.

Our road builder had a different idea following the path already carved by the deer, and indeed this was a better idea, especially because of the curves introduced to the pathway. Landscaping benefits greatly from these curves. The deer were right.

The following year, we purchased a small Toyota pickup truck, which I quickly outfitted with a 40-gallon water tank connected to a gravity-fed garden hose. And it was at this time that I purchased a chain saw and we initiated an ambitious roadside program of tree and shrub planting. Eventually this activity was meant to evolve into several gardens, including a perennial shade garden, a prairie flower garden, a Japanese garden with water feature, and a fruit tree orchard bordering a wildflower meadow. We envisioned a house at the end of the road one day. Needless to say, we were ambitious.
Nancy's Plan

In 1994, my wife sketched a possible house design in the northeast corner of the property at the end of our gravel driveway; she made this sketch on the back of a paper bag. In her plan, a small house was to be connected by breezeway to a gazebo overlooking the rolling farm land to the north.

Marty's Plan

The next year this plan evolved into a more elaborate 2,000 sq ft house drafted by me. The house was to wrap around the wild plum grove and nestle into the meadow, and its main living area was to frame the view to the north, dramatically climaxing the experience of moving the full half mile from gate to the house itself. Even before entering the front door, peering through the windows surrounding it, one would see the plum hedge through the narrow "isthmus" of the structure.
In this design, I strove to follow Wright's maxim about the importance of coherence and organic architecture. "In organic architecture," he wrote, "it is quite impossible to consider the building as one thing, its furnishing another and its setting and environment still another." For Wright this meant associating the building as a whole with its site, in the context of the flat Midwest prairies where he developed his architecture, a romance of the horizontal.

By unifying all aspects of the design, Wright sought to comprehensively integrate spatial flow and harmony by situating his buildings upon their sites with open floor plans uninterrupted by discrete rooms like dining rooms and living rooms and or appendages like porches and balconies. Houses like Fallingwater might have terraces, but their flagstone surfaces flowed through French doors, without interruption of either thresholds or lintels, from the floors within. Wright famously sought to eliminate rooms as boxes. "Any building should be complete," said Wright, "including all within itself. Instead of many things one thing. . . . Perfect correlation, integration is life: it is the first principle of any growth that the thing grown be no mere aggregation, . . . and integration means that no part of anything is of any great value except as it be an integrated part of the harmonious whole."2

Though Wright emphasized human scale throughout, often through use of light shelves and interior decks and trellises typically 80" above floor level, he also sought to manage the movement of people through and around his buildings. He famously hid front doors, which made visitors pause as they worked their way into the structure, whereupon they typically moved into small entrance spaces momentarily and dramatically opening onto larger living spaces. With the building of Unity Temple in Oak Park (the first building ever to use steel

---

reinforced concrete for walls), Wright argued that unlike classical architecture, which is about sculpted exterior forms hollowed out for human activity, his architecture was about the living space within the walls.

Unlike conventional art galleries, his Guggenheim museum in New York City famously ordered the displayed art in linear, albeit spiral fashion; one encounters the paintings in a fixed order. For his houses, he notoriously designed every last detail down to the dinnerware and the clothing his clients were to wear, and he regarded his penchant for built-ins as "client proofing" his designs. He would arrange bedrooms of others' homes when he stayed there as a guest. He would arrange his clients' closets, and he expected things to be restored to his arrangements if and when he returned. His chairs were notoriously uncomfortable, including the three-legged one he tumbled from in Herb Johnson's (Johnson Wax) office. He commonly ran built-in sofas around the length of outside walls in living rooms. People sat next to each other rather in face-to-face conversation groupings, but this feature gained him yet another horizontal line.

In the house Nancy and I would build, space would be phenomenological: It was to be a transformative experience for the dweller akin to my experience amidst the walnuts. The space would come to life only in the experience of the dweller. It was to be this experience and not just the structure or even the space within the structure that would re-enlighten both the individual and the immediate environment. The built environment might shape this transformation, but this could only be realized in the deeply personal experience of the dweller.

According to my design, once inside and moving towards the living area, the space explodes, opening up into the clerestory space, and out as the curves defined by the exterior wall to the south, the west clerestory windows above, and the stairs to the south would all flair outwards, There were to be no posts to interrupt this experience. The curves, moreover, were
segments of ellipses, not arcs from circles, so moving from entrance to deck, the sense of curving would accelerate. The curved path from front entrance to deck was also defined by curved flooring that followed the curve of the west clerestory; the decking would extend the flooring outside. The stairs to the lower level would move one's sight down.

The large window and doors opening north onto the deck would capture the view completely, and continuation outside onto the deck would immerse one in it. The joists supporting the living area roof were to run exposed through the clerestory and were perpendicular to the west clerestory curve. The curved path from front entrance to deck was also defined by curved flooring that follows the curve of the west clerestory; the decking was to extend the flooring beyond the north wall.

On the deck itself, the north stairs were to be the final step from the house into the panorama to the north; the stairs were recessed slightly into the deck so their presence would only be suggested even from indoors. From the deck, the corn below would appear as a ground cover, a great sea with waves of tassels moving in the wind (corn tassels are the dominant motif in the large window, above, to the north). More than architecture as the space within, my house was to be about the experience of the dweller moving towards, into, and through the structure. Architecture here was about an unfolding transformative experience into
a new domain. It was to be this experience, not just the structure nor even the space within, that would re-enlighten both the individual and the immediate environment, each enriching the other.

Charles Montooth's Plan

In 1996, we turned our house project over to Charles Montooth for construction drawings; Montooth had been one of Frank Lloyd Wright's original apprentices, at Taliesin in Spring Green, Wisconsin. He surprised us by completely redesigning my 1995 plan, and though in the end we did not build it because of cost (in true Taliesin form), we learned enormously from our experience working with him, and I came to regard his fees as tuition of sorts. It was one of the last designs for a house done by a Taliesin architect. His design not only nestled the structure into the wild plum grove, it had a fanciful deck running completely around it,
including a bridge from the kitchen. It featured an east-facing clerestory running the length of the structure that would flood the interior with morning sunlight, as well as a Wright signature perimeter sofa (crafting yet another horizontal line into the interior). With a high ceiling peaking at the clerestory, Montooth rendered human scale in the interior by artful use of light shelves, decking, and trellises throughout. The exterior doors opened directly onto the outside deck with neither thresholds nor lintels (only light shelves). As Wright stressed, it was essential to "harmonize all necessary openings to outside or inside with good human proportions and make them occur naturally – singly or as a series in the scheme of the whole building."  

Realizing we could not afford to build the magnificent house Charles Montooth designed for us, we reduced our sights to designing a much smaller dwelling only half way up our gravel driveway. Our inspiration was the gatehouse at the Anderson Gardens Japanese Garden in Rockford, Illinois, especially with its splayed rafters at the each end. Rather than supporting our roof with such rafters, however, our 700-sq ft teahouse would be built with Western cedar rafters starting at a common point in the living-dining area (and repeated in one of the bedrooms) like tree branches at a common point in the ceiling. The splayed beams penetrated the exterior walls forming a trellis outside. We were assisted in our plans by Paul Kardatsky former apprentice to Charles Montooth.

Anderson Gardens Gatehouse, Rockford, Illinois
Mindful of Wright's emphasis on the importance of natural forms, natural materials, and earth colors, all cherry trim used to sheathe the ceiling and rafter beams was milled from a single large cherry tree felled at the site. A large (cultured) limestone hearth and chimney chase opening on two sides was to anchor the center of our home.

A 4" cherry light shelf circumscribed every room in the house aside from the bathroom. The walls were sheathed in painter canvas panels with deep bronze painted recesses between the panels and also for recessed baseboards. All exterior doors and windows "dropped" from the light shelves. Interior doors were to be sliding shoji screens; for the two bedrooms, when they slid open, they closed off the room opening. When they slid closed, they assured privacy while revealing the closets with built in bureaus.
With the assistance of our carpenter, John Hiertz, the curves in the shoji screen tracks inspired curved corners in all the light shelf corners. It was Hiertz who designed and built the sunbursts that formed the base of the splayed beams.

We would incorporate all heating, lighting, plumbing so that these systems became constituent parts of the building itself as in Wright's Usonian houses. Besides the wood burning fireplace, the interior heat was geothermal radiant with pex tubing embedded in our waxed acid stained concrete floor. In warm summer months, a differential temperature controller (DTC), which measured temperature differences of 5 degrees or more between outside and inside would automatically open motorized awning windows and turn on an exhaust fan at night, and then reverse the process in the mornings when the outside temperatures rose. This was our air conditioning.
Conclusion

What we have seen in this book is a result of my re-enlightenment starting in a moment of flow amidst the walnuts fueled by a moment of flow. If my moment of flow had been but a fleeting experience with the walnuts, it might have been merely a memorable afternoon excursion but not a re-enlightenment. Re-enlightenments always define new and significant understandings. Flow potentially has power of seduction. Subsequent to my experience with the walnuts, I acted on a window of promise even if I could not anticipate what was to follow. My initial project was pruning the walnuts, which led to construction of a gravel road, which led to landscaping and planting thousands of plants, which worked as a prelude to a house sited amid the wild plums with a wild plant meadow to the south and a sweeping view of rolling farmland to the north. If flow immerses and transports, re-enlightenment transforms understanding. Though unpredictable, such an unfolding course of events opens up and enlightens new domains of understanding that make sense long after the initial experience of flow.
My four-decade journey from a moment of flow amidst the walnuts to the construction of a teahouse, a work of art, was arduous and ultimately spiritual. Over time, I came to see that the most important episodes of my adult life were interrelated even though at the time, they seemed distinct, disparate, and at times hectically unrelated. One moment I was at the 20 acres pruning trees, planting other trees and shrubs, and fighting garlic mustard. Other times at the university, I was teaching and doing research on writing and instruction. Yet other times I was designing and ultimately participating in the construction of a house. I regularly attended professional meetings where I presented reports of my research.

Each moment, I came to understand, was either about or was an immersion in which seemingly mundane details became transformed and interrelated. My experience among the walnuts was the moment of magic that came to foretell all the others. It was a true moment of re-enlightenment.
For psychologist Carl Jung, such moments define sublimation, "the royal art where the true gold is made. . . . It is not, as Freud would have it, a voluntary and forcible channeling of instinct into a spurious field of application [e.g., art, culture, and civilization] but an alchemical transformation for which fire and prima materia are needed. Sublimatio is a great mystery." For Freud, sublimation causally reduces one psychic product to another—the ego and superego channeling the base impulses of the id. For Jung, sublimation connects psychological forces dynamically with the production of art and symbol. Symbol, in a form
of transcendent function, has the power to induce psychic transformation. For Freud, sublimation described a voluntary act of will. For Jung, sublimation can only "happen" to us as a sort of grace.\textsuperscript{4} Grace, in Jung's sense, represents an awakened sense of immersion, transcendence, and interdependence in which the otherwise mundane is transformed into the symbolic.\textsuperscript{5}

In retrospect, it is perhaps not difficult to see the resonance of my research on both writing and instruction with my lessons from the 20 acres. I came to understand both writing and instruction as activities critically involving vital interrelationships and interactions of writers and readers and classroom conversants. Not unlike my encounter with the walnuts on that afternoon in 1977, I came to understand written communication as a transformative experience where writers and readers lose themselves in the text, which if they were illiterate in the language of the text, would be opaque. It is the dialogic process of written communication and engaged discussion which transforms texts and brings them to life as they are read and understood. Both writing and reading, as well as open-ended, vigorous classroom discussion, are fundamentally processes of immersion, transcendence, and conversant interdependence.

Nor too is it not too far fetched to understand architecture along these lines as a matter of situating structures organically in their environment. Indeed, Frank Lloyd Wright fully developed this conception of architecture. Freud might argue that my architectural ventures


represented a "voluntary and forcible channeling of instinct into a spurious field of application," namely my teahouse. But I would vigorously disagree; my ultimate decision was instead based on my understanding, cultivated over decades of my experience with the 20 acres, of the sacred nature of interrelationships, not only in ecology and architecture but also interpersonally in affirmations of family and marriage or comparably committed relationships. For it is only such consummations that constitute projects transcending mere moments of flow, intoxicating as these may be. Coherence rules all.