GUITAR LESSONS
CONFESSIONS OF A CATHOLIC SCHOOL COWBOY

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GETTING IN TUNE

Staten Island's St. Peter's High School for boys was run by De La Salle Christian Brothers. Many of them had softened by the time of my 1971 arrival, ground down by my predecessors, save for a few hard-nosed, hard drinkers. Perhaps the promise of a life of contemplative study, sandwiched in between the daily whacking of teenage boys into submission, wasn't quite what they had imagined for themselves.

For my senior year, I opted for the Integrated Studies Program, an interdisciplinary course of study where the flavors of art, music, philosophy, history, math and science simmered in one pot and taught by Brother Stanislaus Krysiak. Eighteen of us met after homeroom in an addition attached to the back of the Brothers's residence, the 1857 Nicholas Muller House. We had guest lectures scattered throughout the year but spent the entire day as a group with pipe-smoking, beret-wearing Brother Stan. Eschewing the brotherly black calf-length robe (Habit) and white clerical collar (Rabat), Brother Stan preferred a coat and tie. He spun his record collection of folk songs and classical music or recited e. e. cummings and Ferlinghetti poems. We sat in a circle, legs splayed in metal chairs or sprawled out and dozing on the decommissioned church pews that lined the perimeter. It took a good deal of energy to gauge Bother Stan's mood each day. He was most certainly medicated, a shadow of the man who, as legend would have it, once held a student by the neck, feet dangling outside a fourth-floor window. It was somewhat reassuring that our classroom was on the ground floor. A post on The St. Peter's Alumni Facebook public group (n.d.) is teaming with stories triangulating the abuse. In 2020, Thomas Barnes posted a photograph of the 1977 Integrated class. An earlier alum, James E. Morton responded, "Brother Stan was crazy. Choked us and carried a 2-foot section of a garden hose that he used to beat his students. He was the only teacher I truly feared. Class '70." Responding to the Barnes post, John Eadiccio describes witnessing Brother Stan pick up and throw a desk across the room, the flying object crashing against the wall with the kid still in it.

Corrigan (1988) writes about his life at a suburban London private school as a working-class kid in the 1950s. He recounts suffering symbolic and physical violence meted out by his peers and by his Masters. His teachers were responsible for the

> hurting of the body, the random violence of the cuff against the ear, the slap around the face, the book thrown hard into the face, the twisting of the arm … and there, at the end of the chamber of horrors, the cane. (p. 146)

At Peter's, we had Brother Kevin, who delivered us to religion by way of an extremely hard "no look" kick to the shin while appearing fully engaged in discourse with a student to the left or right. I may not have seen it coming, but I most definitely felt it when it arrived. All the fun was not

reserved for the frocked. One piece of lore followed a diminutive lay history teacher, Mr. Victor T. Carasaniti Esq., who had to jump up in order grab hold of a student's neck. He must have been even more infuriated and frustrated when he discovered in his clenched fist a clip-on tie.

For the first week of our Integrated Studies course, Brother Stan had us out engaging in what could have come from the pages of Eliot Wigginton's (1972) *Foxfire* on oral histories, home remedies, butter churning, hog tying, and log cabin building. There was a stand of woods behind the Staten Island campus buildings where we were sent to forage for sticks and rocks to fashion survival tools, bespoke makeshift hatchets (natural twine, flat triangle-shaped stones), and modern flails. We'd certainly starve, but at least we'd take no prisoners.

Intro: The Curriculum

The Integrated Program became a refuge for aspiring artists, writers, dabblers, and others who perhaps had their fill of straight academics. Stand-alone music and art classes were virtually non-existent in our high school curriculum. Across public schools, in times of budget cuts, save for affluent districts and magnet schools, the arts are always first to go, a clear sign that they have no real value. I would eventually come to put away these childish things: sketchpad, drawing pencils, paints and brushes.

For its part, The Integrated Studies Program stood on the fringes of the traditional discrete-subject high school curriculum. For my part, electing an integrated course of study was not an insignificant leap into the unknown. I was aware at the time that such a path might close me off from certain trajectories, careers that require continuous math and science courses. I had already received that message as an incoming freshman. I was tracked into Earth science instead of biology and placed into entry-level remedial algebra.

Brother Stan and I clashed, more like collided. My challenges lobbed during class were clear, though failed, attempts at undermining the idol worship I observed from some of the other, less indifferent classmates. For his part, Brother Stan delivered a liberal education steeped in classic and contemporary literature and poetry with emphasis on individual choice and personal responsibility. There was no diversity to speak of. Shirley Jackson's (1948) "The Lottery," might have been the only woman writer. Lewis Carroll's (1871/1902) bizarre (for the uninitiated) "Jabberwocky" was a yearly mainstay, as were the ribald drinking songs of the British Isles. With some elements of the philosophy of Paulo Freire's (1970) and the perils of the Banking Concept of Education (1970), at the end of each year Brother Stan presented to select students the coveted "broken spoon award," representing liberation from spoon-fed knowledge. I went home empty-handed.

Aside from fashioning primitive survival tools, we tried our hand at printmaking and painting. The materials were left out and around the room for our experimentation. I painted a watercolor of a Van Gogh self-portrait, mimicking the striations of multiple colors for the face, reddish beard, blue jacket, and cornflower straw hat. I made a stamp by carving "Neil Young" on a 4x5 inch piece of linoleum. We were invited to bring in our own music for class response. Again with the Neil Young (1972), I chose "Alabama" from his *Harvest* album. In the song about the southern state's legacy of enslavement, Brother Stan pointed out the line, "Swing low down in Alabama," borrowed from "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," the African-American spiritual that

doubled as a visual reference to public lynchings. For the midterm, we were required to write a fifty-page paper bringing the many disciplines to bear on our understanding of a certain epoch. Rapt by Chaucer's (ca. 1400/1987) *Canterbury Tales*, I chose the Middle Ages. The same length was required for the final paper, where likewise we were to use knowledge in the disciplines to cast our eyes to the future. I had to take off work at the A&P to finish mine, turning it in only hours before graduation. I was shocked when I didn't get my diploma on time, failing to hold back tears during the family celebration at a local Chinese restaurant.

1st Verse

Growing up in a predominantly working-class neighborhood with working class parents, I had one foot squarely in each world—a divided self in terms of labor and academics. By junior year, I was working evenings and Saturdays. I switched to the graveyard shift in college, thinking I could satisfy both halves by keeping a 'round-the-clock pace. I struggled. Yet there was a part of me that was determined not to wind up on the shop floor like Paul Willis's (1977) working-class lads and my own father.

A couple of years prior, two of my closest-in-age siblings, a sister and brother, pooled their money for my sweet sixteenth birthday present, a sunburst Harmony guitar. By way of a string of city buses, we had retraced the steps to the borough of our birthplace, over the Verrazano back to Brooklyn, where we met up with a family friend, a few years older, who brokered the deal and whose attention I sought. On her bed in her family's 61st apartment, my sister looking on, she showed me where to place my hands. As soon as I got my birthday gift home and started plucking, my older brother, with whom I shared a bedroom, instantly regretted his role as my music benefactor.

Figure 1 1 Author, Integrated Studies, 1975 Yearbook photo by Mark Sedutto

Throughout my life, the guitar helped me stand out while providing decent cover, a shield of wood and wire against the world. The guitar saved me—from myself, from the crushing weight of adolescence, from high school—and got me through college. It was literate practice though it would never receive such honors or status equal to words on the page. While a few years would pass before I would write my first song, the seeds were sown—the beginnings of self-expression through music and identity formation through an artform practiced individually as well as in a community.

CHORUS: BROTHER STAN TAKES US ON A FIELDTRIP

For nearly 70 years, The Back Fence held sway on at the corner of Bleeker and Thompson before raising a surrender flag in 2013 to the pummeling waves of inflation by NYC real estate greed. Few places of its kind remain. The Back Fence, surrounded by a façade of wooden pickets, was a steady club venue in the spring of 1975, despite the 60s folk revival having come and gone. Danny Herlihy and I ditched out of our Integrated Studies field trip, a West Village self-guided walking tour where we were to “record and write of our experiences making use all of our senses.” We slipped inside the nightclub and took two seats at the bar, almost caught, ducking and turning away when we saw Brother Stan through the glass doors standing on the corner. He must have spotted us.

Inside the club, a small stage rose about six or eight inches, just enough to be above the frenzied crowd that existed only in our minds. The floor was covered in strewn sawdust. Unbeknownst to me, I would develop a lifelong bond with the stringy wood fibers, but that story is for another time. One or two draughts in and Danny got up the nerve to ask the bartender how we might go about auditioning, which, as it turned out, was a simple matter of stopping in and showing the manager what we got, which at the time at least was not a lot. Neither of us could sing, and my guitar playing was entry level at best. It was mainly the *idea* of being in a band, and to attract women. What followed was so typical, canonical even, that it should have predicted our catapulting music careers.

We met over at Dan’s house, together with Terence, who had been my friend since young childhood. Terence and I were learning how to play guitar at the same time, both together and separately. He was a year younger and had a good voice, where mine was reedy and untamable. Pot was passed around. We attempted a song. I can’t remember which, but as soon as we started up, I looked across and there was Dan, an unplugged borrowed bass on his lap, which he never ever, until precisely this moment, attempted to play. He was bringing us his best Rick Danko from The Band—eyes closed, face winced with pain, head bobbing to the imaginary bass line he was thrumming. No sound but plenty of passion. We didn’t follow up on the audition. It’s too late now. The Back Fence, in its current iteration, is a corporate, French-inspired tearoom with other locations, two in Florida and one in Houston. Dan is gone too.

THE BRIDGE

In terms of worldview, I didn’t know back then that I was already painting myself into a corner, though I cannot say I had much control of the brush or choice of color. “Our past is still there in our present,” writes Eribon (2013, p. 223). So “we remake ourselves,” we recreate ourselves,” but “we do not make ourselves, we do not create ourselves,” he continues. Raised in Brooklyn until the mid-60s, moving to Staten Island as a pre-teen, there I was thinking I was unique—not special, just a little different from everyone else. In truth I was just like about every other white kid in that particular time and place. Who, adolescent boys in particular, wants to be told they are sliding into the runnels of an already carved path, one not necessarily predetermined, but not too far off? The idea that as I was writing a story that was also being written for me was inconceivable and clashed with my notion of the self-actualized individualist. To perceive my experience as a predictable rite of passage—my core identity as a social construct informed by race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and generation—would have crumbled my little

world. The school curriculum was of no help. Otherwise, I might have even examined my own white male, able-bodied, heterosexual privilege.

In the early grammar school years, and increasingly in high school, I cast myself as outsider. Welcome to adolescence. None of us fit. Again, not special. I had a reciprocal relationship with trouble—sometimes it found me, and other times I did the looking. That's not only how I remember that time in my life, but it's how I continue to act in this world—a solitary man against a system that is bent on grinding me down. I took pride in my own outsider status. Some schoolmates suffered far worse than anyone: the handful of Black students, and the few among them awarded scholarships to keep alive the basketball winning streak, or those whose sexual orientation, students and teachers alike, we obsessed over and ridiculed.

Truth be told, I was never alone; I only felt that way. A small band of us marched the hallways, a scattered platoon clad in flannel shirts underneath the required necktie and sports jacket or optional sweater. At times we had to surrender, relenting to the highly flammable, extremely toxic, polyester shirt trend, garish prints with the wide and sharply pointed collars. Ugh. Clothing stores didn't stock straight collars or straight-legged pants in the 70s. On the platform shoes, however, I would not budge.

2ND VERSE: RADIO AS CURRICULUM

Repelled by disco, protesting with my feet, I wore my construction work boots proudly. I didn't get punk rock either; it felt like there was nothing *to* get. Angst. Anarchy. Nihilism. That much I got. Mostly, I saw only nonsense—screaming spectacle. White kid problems. Bang your head against the wall? See if I care. Torn fabric and safety-pinned garments; I sewed my tears shut by hand with brightly colored thread and covered the holes with contrasting flavorful blocks of patterned fabric. Besides, I didn't need any tips from punk on how to sing and play badly. I was not aware that these movements, disco, punk, and the burgeoning hip-hop scene yet to reach the shores of Staten Island from the Bronx house parties where it originated, were each in their own way outcries against a racist, classist, heteronormative establishment, an establishment in which I myself was a stakeholder. Who was I trying to kid? Beneath all the patches, the work boots and moccasins, the beads and fringe, the Army & Navy Store military jackets with the sergeant stripes, beat the heart of a barely left of center Kennedy Democrat.

I was running out of corner to paint myself into, and yet I was put off and showed further intolerance for the homoerotic, gender-bending, androgynous play of David Bowie, The New York Doll's, and other glam rock bands. While the band Kiss was just play-acting; these players were for real. Their talent was obvious, so why couldn't they just play it straight? I enjoyed some of the Prog rock—*Yes* was my very first concert in Madison Square Garden—but that type of music was too complex. Mostly I listened to what I, myself, might be able to play. With all of that narrowing and closing off routes, I felt I had no other choice than to embrace or be absorbed by the influences of the West coast singer-songwriter folk rock musician. No big surprise. I just wanted to be a cowboy, the pretend kind.

The musical path, which I thought at the time—as a suburban white kid in the 70s—was of my own choosing was circumscribed. I found the identity I felt I was searching for in the music of Willie Nelson and The Eagles with their western narratives. I was enthralled with the western tableaux portrayed Henry Dilz's photograph on the back cover of The Eagles' (1973) *Desperado* album. Standing over the fallen band, and against the natural order of things, were the roadies,

managers, producers, and art director. Wielding shotguns and wearing sheriff badges, they look off in the distance or stare defiantly right into the lens. The subjugated band members were playing dead, laying side-by-side in the dirt, lifeless and strung together with rope. Those were my heroes, and the heroes were turned into victims. It would be decades before I would learn that the gunslingers they were modelling and about whom I fantasized were either former Confederate soldiers like the James and Younger Gang, or they were cast as such in the media. Some were deserters, namely the Tennessee Kirkland Bushwackers, or North Carolina's Henry Berry Lowery, and some among them were saboteurs fighting The Lost Cause, enslavers of Black bodies, long after the ceasefire at Appomattox (Dyer, 1994; Settle, 1977; Tennessee v. Kirkland et al., 1866; Townsend, 1872; Williams, 2018).

Through these musical personas, I embraced the profoundly lonely cowboy, prone to anger and violence. Their lessons came all the way from California, Texas, Tennessee, and Oklahoma, reaching NYC over the airwaves of WHN (1050 AM) Radio Station. The high and lonesome sound, the nasally tenors, the sweet sounds of fiddle and steel guitar mixed with static enveloping the cab of my 63 Chevy pickup. As imagined in the figure of "The Red Headed Stranger" who was "wild in his anger" so "Don't cross him, don't boss him," Willie Nelson (1975) warns of the inevitable, read as justifiable, violence to come. Living in a city where I never felt I belonged, cowboy identity fed my outsider-ness, my perceived otherness, my aspirations of rugged individualism, and the love-deprived or scorned hero as victim. The feeling echoes in Warren Zevon's (1976) line, "Poor, poor pitiful me," and, as Willie continues, "he's riding and hiding his pain." I aspired to be more like Townes Van Zandt's (1972) Pancho, of "Pancho & Lefty," chased through the desert by the Federales, no more bullets left in my pistola. However, I feared a closer resemblance to Lefty, whose bent moral compass might lead one, albeit in desperation, to turn his friend in to the authorities for immunity and a cash payout.

I paid no attention to the criticism of the singer-songwriter movement. Critics railed against the sound that was wafting out of Laurel Canyon and beyond. There was a slew of criticism by those averse to the West coast singer-songwriter and country rock genres (Bangs, 1988, 2008; Christgau, 1972; Marsh & Swenson, 1979). On The Eagles, Christgau writes that it is "no accidental irony that such hard-rock professionals convey their integrated vision of self-possession and pastoral cool by way of a dynamite corporate machine." All of the bravado and the history of marginalization of women and people of color and normalization contained within country music is unmistakable and inexcusable.

3rd Verse: Scanning the Horizon

Growing up, looking west for inspiration fit an identity tied up in this cowboy myth. I modeled my identity as the saloon visiting, gunslinging, bronco-taming, into the sunset riding Western hero—in short, a cartoon character. During the 70s there was a revival of western wear, and I was all in. With work money, I filled out my wardrobe with Wrangler brand, Dee-Cee or H Bar C pearl-snapped shirts, unaware that I was investing in a cowboy persona that justifies white dominance and white violence, the project and byproduct of manifest destiny. What I was listening to and aspired to play and one day create myself reaffirmed my biased worldview. The music I was enjoying was gender normative and marginalized women. My kind of music promoted and provided the soundtrack for white supremacy. The sound was colonialist, appropriating culture with little or no acknowledgement of the art and talent and language and history extracted from

people of color. What I did not understand until much later in life were the behind-the-scenes workings, the discrediting and the erasure of other identities in how the 20th Century cowboy myth was able to flourish (Cox Richardson, 2020; Nelson Limerick, 1987). Just like the explorer myth in the centuries prior, he simply has got to be first and alone. In the 1970s and beyond, these just were not the thoughts and imaginings rattling inside the head of a white high school kid, born in Brooklyn, raised in Staten Island, one foot in the city and one foot in the country.

4TH VERSE: RELAXED RULES AND OPPRESSION ARE OFTEN FELLOW TRAVELERS

Schools simultaneously deny yet rule *through* the body (Grumet, 1988). Cranny-Francis (1995) recounts a story of being able to tell if a woman was raised in a convent by how she clenches her hands by her side as she walks. Eribon (2013) experiences class intimidation when a fellow student *does not* shield his mouth with his hand when speaking. My awareness of power relations performed on the body preceded my reading of Foucault (1975), who provided a framework and language for analysis. My tangles with authority preceded high school. Having been practically raised by nuns, during daylight hours at least, I know the feel of the ruler as I complied with an outstretched hand. I experienced the public shame and humiliation, having wet myself when that same hand raised attached to this body was ignored. From my twelve years "on the inside," I learned the inscriptions authority and power makes on the body. But from Brother Stan, I also learned the "contradictions of control" (McNeil, 2013), the subtle ways in which authority reveals itself, in spite of or because of all the informalities. Quite like McNeil's analysis of high school classroom discourse, with Brother Stan, we kept our part of the bargain, most of the time, by not being overly disruptive, tolerating the boredom of the painstakingly slow pace, in exchange for less work, less rigor, settling for a much less vibrant curriculum. Our epistemological and ontological challenges were permissible so long as we submitted and did not oppose or try to undermine Brother Stan. Those willing to stroke his ego did well. I did not because I would not, could not. I should have been nurtured by Brother Stan but would not yield to the idol worship. Others would fawn and fall into his favor, but I refused. Which is not to say that I was not seeking the approval I never received. In truth, I was not putting in the academic work, choosing the "real work" of physical labor valued by my working-class identity. As a result, I was digging myself in deeper, similar to the social reproduction of Paul Willis's (1981) lads who were determined to end up on the shopfloor. It took me nearly a decade as a postal worker to climb out of that hole. For that to occur, I had to create distance from my working-class identity, though not so severely as Eribon (2013), who as a young gay man felt he had to leave his hometown of Reims, completely cut ties with his family for decades, in an attempt to expunge any remnants of the stain of working-class.

The afternoon in the West Village was significant for a number of reasons, together with all the moves that brought me to that moment on Bleeker and Thompson. Brother Stan created a non-traditional classroom and showed us curriculum outside of school, off the school grounds, and away from the confines of a provincial, isolated island culture. Brother Stan was teaching us how to find curriculum in the world, in the architecture, and in the sights, sounds, and smells, the diversity, and the vibrant thrum of Manhattan. We were encouraged to explore the seedy sides of the city, the freaky little headshops and record stores, the dirty, grimy, pre-Guiliani, pre-Disney city. And yet, despite the program's progressive offering, especially in contrast to rest of our high school, the lack of convention and loosely coupled authority (he had to have seen us hoisting away

at the bar), Dan and I shrugged it off, all of it, ditching school for the promise of a Rock-n-Roll life. Music had a much greater hold than school, a greater pull.

Without guitar and the beginnings of being a singer songwriter, I likely would not have survived high school mostly because music allowed me to practice literacy on my own terms. I would have liked to believe that I was able to see the contradictions of freedom and determinism, the hypocrisy in the patriarchy, the racism and sexism in the worlds of folk, rock, and country (Goodall, 1991). I would hope. Instead, I replaced one idol, religious authority, for another, as personified in the figure of the white male cowboy rock god that I aspired to be, and to this day, were I to be honest, still do. That's the unfinished business that I can no longer live with and so have much to work through.

Coda: The Remaking of the Boy: Teacher and Curriculum as Mavericky

Like the cowboy in me, I cannot even claim exceptionalism as an educator. In fact, writing this piece has made me aware of the subconscious influences of the St. Peter's Integrated Studies Program on my own past, present, and future teaching. The use of daily journaling, writing to learn, and writing across the disciplines have their beginnings for me in Brother Stan's Integrated Studies Program, and yet it never once dawned on me that my philosophy of teaching and learning was spurred by my senior year high school experience. I designed and am current steward of Literature, Art & Media, a graduate literacy course with emphasis on multiliteracies and student choice. Among projects that could just as easily fit into the integrated curriculum are the assemblage of identity-boxes drawing on the art of Joseph Cornell and the curriculum of poet Charles Simic via Platt (1998); choices that involve immersion in a specific mode or genre, multimodal forms of expression (poetry/ modern dance, for example); and the study of artists as advocates for social justice, culminating in social justice curriculum projects. These loosely designed assignments bear a strong resemblance to some of my senior year high school work. Could it be that a major chunk of my career has been a subconscious apology to Brother Stan, a homage or a vindication, seeking redemption for my earlier sins—the sin of adolescent hubris and lack of compassion and understanding for what Brother Stan was trying to do?

I continue to dress the cowboy. It seems my generation of men will never grow up enough to become the fathers and grandfathers who wore coat and tie at dinner, fedora required before leaving the house, a "fit" that even transcended social class lines. That's what John Prine (1973) sang about with his own grandfather, the carpenter: "Grandpa wore his suits to dinner/Each and every day/No particular reason/he just dressed that way." Umberto Eco's (1983) essay on wearing blue jeans, explores clothing as armor, as "semiotic devices, machines for communicating" and how through our clothing we relate to the world. Warriors lived their lives externally, whereas "Monks were rich in interior life" their habit "released it" gave the body freedom to forget about itself" (pp. 194–195). I am not here to forget, and I refuse any longer to relinquish my body in order to pay homage to the mind.

Figure 2 Brother Stan, photograph by Mark Sedutto

Outro

Following right along with the trend of corporatization and militarization of schooling and education, St. Peter's now has a president, who as it happens is my former history teacher. Recently, the building that once housed the De La Salle Christian Brothers was razed. Our Integrated Studies classroom is gone. The demolition makes way for a sports field that will eventually be a fully enclosed sports center. Plans for the ground floor of the main campus building "include new classrooms for a sea cadet/ROTC program, a new business center and a state-of-the-art technology center" (Knudsen, 2025, n.p.). All of the Christian Brothers are gone. Though they may continue to haunt some of us, they no longer inhabit the grounds of St. Peter's in any physical form.

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