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## MARYLAND AND EL DUENDE

*Walking the wire is living, all the rest is waiting.*

Quote attributed to high wire circus performer Karl Wallenda  
in Eric Goffman's 1967 essay, *Where the Action Is*

### WHAT MADE MARYLAND MARYLAND?

What made Maryland Maryland? I scan my memories for clues to this question—for a way to get a handle on the ineffable but undeniable culture of the Overseas Program. Cascading recollections of colleagues, events, and conversations rise to the surface of my mind. These memories, themselves, make me think of the fractal Mandelbrot set, although they are not identical scaled repetitions as in Mandelbrot's geometry. Indeed, my Maryland images differ wildly from one another—but—yet—they do share an essence, a *je-ne-sais-quoi* of similarity. What is it?

### EL DUENDE

This shared essence has something to do with what the Spanish name “El Duende.” An evocative force, El Duende appears when we walk a razor's edge, a high wire—a hazardous path where failure, imminently possible, carries significant cost. El Duende dares us, taunts us into taking things seriously, into being fully present, into manifesting our most authentic creative selves in the face of risk. El Duende *will not approach at all if he does not see the possibility of death* recounts Garcia Lorca in *Poet in New York*.

An artistic expression of El Duende can be experienced through the tense dramatic muscled flair of the flamenco dance and its accompanying soulful guitar melodies. Perhaps it finds expression as well, although far more subtly, in the tango. But, could it show up in a school administration? In the duties of a traveling teacher?

Yes, I think so. We ran a risky contract business with concomitant negotiations, calculations, and gambles. We were a lean machine. Not a dime of fat. Minimalist overhead. No job security. Pressures from multiple sides: military clients, stateside campus, other schools. The stretch of geography

brought in constraints. We were, at the same time, a university with all the rigors of serious scholarship. Conditions were hardly conducive to academic endeavors. Every day of work meant a constant juggling of demands and resources with multiple bottom lines. Nobody could sit back, relax, and take it easy. The Overseas Program was a high wire program—but—we had a calling to walk that wire—or so we thought.

Did we really have a calling? Or was this a world of our own making? Well. Yes. It was a world of our own making. After all, we all live in Geertzian *webs of significance that we ourselves have spun*, right? In the Maryland web of significance, we still believed in enchantment. We still believed in magic. We held dear the transformative powers of a novel, a poem, a painting, a theory, a provocative conversation, some solid history or math, and how they could enliven and enrich a human life.

The disenchantment of the world, as observed by Max Weber, arrives as a consequence of industrialization with its accompanying demands (and mind set) for legibility, standardization, simplification, predictability, demystification. Of course, at Maryland we had processes for scheduling classes and tracking students by credit earned. We did the math of money and enrollments but that wasn't what it was about. Bean counting always got in its word but not the last one.

I once asked Joe Arden what metaphor he would choose for the Overseas Program. He saw us, he said, *like the farthestmost outpost of the Roman Legion with the barbarians at the door*. We had a mission and hard fighting, but absolutely worth it. The stakes were high.

Maryland's self-woven web of significance and the El Duende that it conjured up, stretched its fingers, in a strange fractal sort of way, throughout the organization. We each lived it in our own style.

I remember Joe Arden speaking, in a quiet, musing sort of tone, of the peculiar hard won and faint taste of honey after a wire walk. He recalled a critical passage in a contract negotiation: *And I (Joe) said: Would it be alright with you, would it be alright with you* (repeating, as was his wont, a few key words) *if we just moved the required average class size from fifteen students to sixteen?* Joe had done his calculations; he knew exactly what a contractual average of one more student per class actually meant. He tiptoed through that passage stealthily and carefully. He pulled off the negotiation. The taste of honey was his reward.

I remember Area Director Wally Knoche reflecting on his experience: *The job is impossible. It can't be done. All you can do is set priorities and if it blows up on you, then you know you got your priorities wrong*. One day he did get his priorities wrong and did blow up on him and he did fall off the wire.

I remember Area Director Rosemary Hoffmann reviewing her duties. *You can't do it all*, she said, *there are hundreds of worthwhile things to do. If a good idea has three obstacles, I dismiss it out of hand. If it has two obstacles, I give it a glance but also dismiss it. If there is only one obstacle then, but only then, will I have a look*.

Faculty, no less than staff, experienced themselves as on a mission, working against the odds. They had not been given scripts or elaborate Standard Operating Procedures. No bureaucracy on earth could predict all the different circumstances faculty would find themselves facing. Authority and responsibility had been fully delegated to them. As soldiers in the Roman Legion they went forth into the land, armed with Maryland Values, and made it up as they went along. As independent soldiers/craftsmen/teachers, they knew full well that they were the front-line alchemists—performing the magic, which was what the Overseas Program was ultimately all about.

## EL DUENDE AS TRICKSTER

If our working lives had been nothing but Roman Legioning and flamenco foot stamping we would have all died of exhaustion. El Duende at Maryland also came traipsing in as a trickster, a complete clown. As we did our damndest to skillfully juggle obligations, our rationality and competence would come face to face with downright patent absurdity. Comic relief to our rescue. It wasn't an apple a day that kept us healthy it was a daily guffaw.

When one education center insisted on scheduling an English Literature class at midnight. Marty Shull replied, *Absolutely. No problem.* She put it on the published schedule, listing as instructor, Thomas Hardy. Nobody in the education center caught it. Ernie Hankamer called in from the UK to say, *Well, Marty, sounds like you have a live one.* Marty replied: *If this course runs I will go teach it myself.*

Or, for a personal example, what was I to do while attending a local education center celebration of graduating students. The ESO appeared, in full resplendent regalia, to solemnly confer oversized gold paper diplomas to the new graduates—yes, to the new graduates of his education center. The students had his big ego number: they knew only schools could award diplomas. We let it roll with good grace.

## CURTAINS

To repeat, the Maryland *modus operandi* emerged from a web of significance that we ourselves had conjured up. We didn't have to see ourselves and our jobs this way. When I asked the Director of Boston University, working in similar circumstances, to provide a metaphor, he said, *Well, a bus stop.* Boston ran a very different kind of shop: tasks were executed in a rather perfunctory and flat manner. Faculty arrived on short contracts, taught their classes, disappeared, and nobody kept in touch.

Eventually the bus stop metaphor and the Weberian paradigm of production won out over magic.

I have attended only two of the OMA reunions. Faculty get up and speak with intense emotionality about their time at Maryland. Some of the essays submitted to this collection vividly recall wire walking. Being stretched beyond what was thought possible. Being surprised. Being fully alive. Exploits. Traveling teacher aka gypsy scholar aka Indiana Jones.

To be fully honest, I found these reunions emotionally draining. Of course, it was grand to see familiar faces. There we were, gray with expanded waistlines, but together. The difficulty was not just the passing of time, our aging faces, and colleagues now gone. El Duende tells us of the courageous facing of failure and death. It matters how we die. It matters, if yield we must, that we yield to a noble opponent. The Overseas Program with its craft and enchantment was dismantled by the forces of mediocre mass administration and the McDondalization of higher education.

No more high wire. Those of us who remain just wait.