

Rodney Romig, July 9, 2020

Rodney Romig's novel *Lakeside* won the Florida Writers Association award for best published literary novel of 2013. He is also the author of the Dr. Dan Trix travel/mystery series available on Amazon.

Given that my Maryland experience was a bakery, it's difficult to deliver one loaf of bread.

It all started when I had to borrow a three-piece suit from a high school friend for my interview with Julian Jones. I was a size forty. My friend was a thirty-eight, maybe a thirty-six. One thing for sure; it was the most upright posture I'd known in years.

It ended with a term at RAF Mildenhall and schooners of Oloroso at the Bellman's Arms after class with maidens captivated by wit and charm and upright posture.

In between, it was one hell of a ride.

Maryland shaped my life.

Not as a sculpture would turn a lump of wet clay into a cavalier with sword held high. Maybe it was as ideology gradually shapes the lumpen public into active citizens. Then again, maybe it was as a keg of beer fallen off a truck, dented forever, still serves its purpose.

The courses one takes in a PhD program in economics are often unrelated to the courses we were tasked to teach. My graduate microeconomics course dealt primarily with set theory. Not a price or a quantity or a breakeven point to be seen. One of the first courses I was assigned to teach was intermediate microeconomics that featured a text with nothing but prices and quantities and breakeven points. After a full day of prep, I was still reading the text as I walked up the hill to the classrooms.

On a three-legged life-stool, self-discipline was certainly one of the legs. It was a necessity if you were to function well in the Maryland classroom. Fortunately, I had laid that groundwork.

Discipline is generally imposed on us from external institutions, and generally from kindergarten till retirement. Schools, sports teams, choir practice, jobs, the military, add to the list, all impose discipline. Go there, do that, and by the way you'd better be on time.

It is only when you are "made redundant" as the English say, your girl/boy friend leaves you for a performance artist who wears a turban, and you have no place to live, that you truly realize how imposed discipline impacts your life. About then you realize you haven't got a clue what to do with yourself.

It was helpful to have been through all that before teaching with Maryland.

Self-reliance was another leg on that three-legged stool.

Often I would fly into an assignment, like in Taipei, or drive into someplace like Pirmasens, where I was the only Marylander in town.

I shared a room during orientation with the University of Maryland – Far East Division (UMAFED). The guy's name was Smiley McGarr. The nickname was well deserved.

I don't remember the particulars, but Smiley had a brain episode, passed out in his apartment and fell against a radiator. When he didn't show for class, one of his students came to his place. The guy sensed something was wrong and broke in. By that time, not only did Smiley have the brain problem but much of his skin was charred. He didn't recover.

I recall several assignments where, upon arriving, no one knew where I was except some E-5 in the base housing office. Moments like that you understand the meaning and importance of self-reliance.

In four years with Maryland, I only recall a couple people who didn't possess that quality. One guy set his alarm clock for midnight so he could check off another day on the calendar. One day closer to DEROS.

Maryland certainly shaped me as a college teacher.

At first I would lug around a box of texts and copies of learned articles. I'd put them in the base library. Since they were so precious, they could only be read in the library.

What a nitwit.

Students study while they wash clothes, pay bills, feed the baby and prepare for inspection. They don't take material into the carrels and follow the trail of footnotes back to their inspired origin.

I soon realized that students had two resources; me and the text. My audio-visual aids were colored chalk. My job was to clarify and exemplify, in Robin's Egg Blue, Dandelion and Electric Lime, what was in the book. Sometimes that was a real challenge.

The home campus determined what texts were to be used. I was an economist with an emphasis in labor economics. I taught the course often as it was a nice elective. It was not nice that every semester they changed the text. Some effete full professor on the home campus passed around a list of texts being used overseas. One semester it was an economics focused text. Then someone else got ahold of the list and the next semester it was a labor law text. Then an economic historian felt that history was the most revealing approach to the study of the discipline. I didn't know that sociologists had written on the subject until I received that text.

It helped to have had some military experience. That gave me an appreciation for the demands on the student's lives. It also made me tolerant of the

fact that they often hadn't read the assigned chapter in advance. They had deadline demands. The next deadline in the queue had the priority. An exam in economics might not be in the queue for a few weeks. Therefore, economics would get studied in a few weeks. In the meantime, go to class, listen and underline.

Ralph Hassig and I were assigned to Ramasun Station, ten miles from Udorn, Thailand, basically across the Mekong from Vientiane, Laos. From our side of the Mekong we could see huge garishly painted billboards replete with blood spouting from where bayonets had pierced deep into the hearts of dying American soldiers.

We were sent on a mission of mercy.

Ramasun Station was a listening post. It was a three-story-high antenna that was two-miles in circumference. It was powerful. You could listen to Stan Stricker and the Foggy River boys singing your favorites live on Saturday night from the studio of radio station KCOW in Alliance, Nebraska.

Ramasun was there so we could warn the world when Charlie crossed the Mekong and invaded Thailand.

The problem was the troops. Some of them had been there for a year, two years, and never left the compound. Those boys and girls were paranoid.

Enter Ralph and Rod. We were there to take their minds off their troubles, give them something engaging to cogitate, to distract them from their workday woes.

Great idea. But it didn't work.

Maybe I had seven or eight in each of my two economics classes and maybe the same ones in both classes. Ralph had as many in his psychology classes. The troops were betting that Charlie was on the way so why start a course you couldn't finish.

This was in January. We had fled the embassy in Saigon the previous April. After Saigon, the U.S. drew down troops from Thailand very quickly. Udorn Air Base was maintained by a skeleton crew. What was once a thriving small city of bars, tailor shops, restaurants and massage parlors outside the gate became a ghost town.

Entrepreneurs who bet on the eternal presence of the U.S. military in Udorn city lost the bet.

We rented a floor in a newly constructed three-story luxury condo in Udorn. We were the only renters. The place was surrounded by a tall iron picket fence with a twenty-four hour guard included.

"Gong the Door Boy", we called him. Nice guy. Had a little room by the front door. We bought him a bottle of Canadian Club. A few days later we noticed he hadn't touched it. He sampled and didn't like it. What do you like? Mekong whiskey. We bought him Mekong and he returned the CC. Mekong is preserved

with formaldehyde. When mosquitos got in the apartment, we'd lather ourselves with Mekong. Mosquitoes wanted nothing to do with that stuff. But Gong loved it.

After class, Ralph and I would ease into a mildly altered state of perception and have Gong flag down a couple samlors. We'd pay the guys in advance and give them a big tip if they'd let us drive. Ralph and I had races on the deserted streets to the downtown bars. Scared the hell out of those poor guys.

So sometimes you were in Taipei trying to figure out the legalese of a court case involving right-to-work laws in Montana, and sometimes you were the only guy dancing while lonely ladies in mini-skirts languished at the Blue Moon bar in Udorn.

But self-reliance is like a starter in a car. You turn the key, the car starts. But sometimes there's just nowhere to go.

What I prefer to not think much about are those times when there was nowhere to go. Which is to say, I prefer to not recall the times of profound loneliness. Loneliness can coat your yearning soul in smoke and soot and leave you stunned by how deadening the impact.

There was nothing more intimidating than a long grey, rainy weekend at an assignment where you knew no one and strolling down deserted streets under an umbrella was a hell of a pathetic interpretation of exploring.

We all carried sophisticated radio-cassette players and advised one another where to find the best shop in Shinjuku with the best prices. With AFN on the radio and an armload of paperbacks and magazines from the AAFES bookstore, and a trip to the Class VI store where the lime juice for the gimlet cost more than the vodka, a long weekend could be endured. But barely.

The loneliness exponentially enhanced my appreciation of the company of my colleagues, then and now, and many having endured that experience, soldered the bond we shared.

Perhaps I should be thankful for that loneliness. It was instrumental in how I met my wife.

I had a split assignment between Pirmasens Kaserne and Bitburg AB; Pirmasens during the week and Bitburg, a few hours north, on the weekend.

I was living in the ground-floor apartment of a farmhouse in Erlenbrunn, a dorf outside of Pirmasens. There was a gasthaus in Erlenbrunn. On Saturday night the Fiddling Erlenbrunnners played and sang. The trio was composed of a lady drummer, a clarinetist and a guy playing the accordion. Hard not to sing along.

The big attraction in Pirmasens was the Markenbrau brewery. Have you ever been to a town in Germany that didn't think their brewery was the best in all of Deutschland?

I was not in a rush to get back to Pirmasens Saturday night.

After class in Bitburg was over about noon, my students recommended that I stop in Bernkastel-Kues, a wine village on the Mosel. It was the weekend of their annual wine fest, a celebration of the grape harvest.

The Fiddling Erlenbrunnners played late, so if the wine fest proved under-stimulating I could still make it home for a few tunes and a pils.

I changed clothes after class.

A priori, this is important. I wore green denim bell-bottom jeans, a Vargas silk shirt with nymphs exuding from seashells. Around my waist was a hand-tooled tan leather belt with a large brass buckle promoting Propert's Saddle Soap. Golden Frye leather cowboy boots elevated me to a stature that my ego thought I deserved. Around my neck hung an Olympus 35-mm camera fronted by a heavy Tamron 70-210 zoom lens.

On a stud scale of 1-10, I was about 9.7. (Barbara thinks this is overstated by a factor of three.)

Something else that was important a priori; it was the week after Elvis died. I was vulnerable.

I wandered the village a bit then settled on the bleachers in the small *platz* in *stadtmitte*. This was 1977. In that era, not a lot of tourists flocked to the Mosel for wine fests. Mostly it was locals enjoying the opportunity for a celebration.

I thought she was a Pan Am stewardess on long weekend looking for a good time.

She was in luck. I was a good time.

Barbara sat in the row in front of me.

I hesitated for a few minutes. What the heck? Why not?

"What does one do at a wine fest?" I said as I sat down beside her.

I once read in *Reader's Digest* that it doesn't matter what you say at first contact. It's only that you say something.

She looked at me as though I had asked what one does at a snowball fight.

"I'll be right back," she said.

I still have the photo I took as she returned, a glass of Riesling in each hand.

Barbara was a DoDD teacher newly assigned to Baumholder. She was waiting for a couple other newbies. The plan was to rendezvous in Bernkastel.

For some heaven-sent reason, they didn't make it.

I didn't get to sing oom-pah that night with the Fiddling Erlenbrunnners.

We've been together forty-three years, married thirty-nine.

Loneliness and Elvis; some kind of moral there about happiness out of heartache, growth sprouting from decline, realization through self-reliance, Boeuf Bourguignon from MD 20/20.

If it hadn't been for Maryland, I wouldn't have stayed in Europe for another eight years.

University College wisely decided not to tenure faculty overseas. As the former dean of a college of business for twelve years, I can attest that this would have been an administrative disaster.

Like so many Marylanders, many who moved to the adjunct ranks and as many who went back to the U.S. before returning overseas with Maryland, I wasn't at all interested in a tenure track at a small private college in Iowa or a State university in North Dakota.

Troy University had a contract with the Air Force to offer a Master of Public Administration degree. Basically it was a master's in business in disguise.

After interviewing with the executive director at their headquarters in Wiesbaden, I was sitting outside his office waiting to meet with his admin assistant. The office door was cracked enough for me to hear, "I wish we could hire a whole faculty of those Marylanders. All you need to do is give them a textbook, a map and send them on their way."

The student body was different, as were the expectations. These were officers and mid-level GS employees intent on promotion to positions of higher leadership. But the stresses of military life imposed on them were the same as those on our Maryland students.

Maryland was jeans, a versatile all-weather jacket and a shoulder bag. Troy was sport coat and tie, a Burberry raincoat and a briefcase. Maryland was a BOQ. Troy provided housing, apartments and houses, sometimes so damn big that on a blustery rainy night they were flat-out spooky.

To be hired with Maryland, you needed to have the capability of teaching in two disciplines. With Troy, you needed to be able to teach across the spectrum of the business curriculum. You want an assignment this summer on the Mediterranean in Rota, Spain? Can you teach Management Information Systems and Finance? Why, hell yes. Just get me in the game, Coach.

I only learned a few words of Spanish that summer but I learned a lot about MIS and Finance.

As you know, the education contracts with the military were not granted in perpetuity. They were periodically put up for bids. In 1984, Troy lost the contract. Boston University, however, had a similar contract with the Army, offering a Master of Science in Management degree. It was basically an MBA degree but the faculty in the business college in Boston wouldn't let the overseas University College use that title.

While waiting in BU's admin offices in Mannheim to interview with the administrative liaison from the home campus, I was reading something that had Nebraska written on the cover. I'm from the sandhills of Western Nebraska.

The guy was late. After about a half-hour he hustled down the hallway and glibly apologized. He invited me into an office and noticed my novel.

“Mari Sandoz country. That’s depressing, vile territory,” he said, or something to that effect.

He sat down without further acknowledgement and proceeded to run his finger down my resume.

“Don’t judge Nebraska solely by Mari Sandoz. Judge it also by Willa Cather,” I said.

He paused, looked up puzzled and asked a question. What, I don’t remember.

I do remember we spent a half-hour solely talking about literature during an interview for a position on the business faculty.

An assistant finally poked her head in the room advising him that his next interview was waiting.

The last question he asked was for the address where he could send the contract.

Once again, the educational principles learned in the Maryland undergraduate classrooms transferred effectively to the BU graduate classroom.

After twelve years overseas, it was time to be re-patriated. I wanted to know the lady at the dry cleaners by her first name. I wanted to call Luigi at Baci’s restaurant and tell him I’d like the Osso Bucco Friday night. I wanted to vote for the water commissioner. It was time to be an American again.

But how you gonna get ‘em back on the farm, after they’ve seen Paree?

Missoula wouldn’t do. Neither would Phoenix. I had become too cosmopolitan. I don’t mean that with any pretention or haughtiness. The multi-cultural world had become my norm.

After a few summer vacations of searching, it happened. A colleague from BU had taken a position at the U. of Hawaii and invited us to visit. Barbara needed some required credits to move up the DoDD salary scale so U. of Hawaii it was.

She was in Honolulu for a month while I finished a term in Frankfurt. When I arrived, she met me at the airport. With a sweet smelling ginger lei around my neck we drove back to our friend’s home. She poured me a glass of wine and announced we would be moving to Hawaii and hoped I could find a job to support us.

I did. She did as well.

I was on the faculty of Hawaii Pacific University for six years, then twelve years as the dean of the college of business administration. HPU was one of the most, if not the most, internationalized colleges in the U.S. We had students from over sixty countries. Most of those countries were represented in the college of business with some 2500 students.

My time with Maryland, then Troy and BU, and the many travels during breaks, served me well in that environment. It was rare when I couldn’t use the

student's home country to exemplify some economic idea or business strategy. They liked that. It created a kinship and gave them a feeling that I knew something about what they were about.

It also helped as the dean. We consciously hired faculty from around the world to loosely mimic the demographic of the student body; Turkey, Malaysia, Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Germany, Italy, Iran, India, Uzbekistan, Cleveland, etc. It was a privilege to hire that faculty and be able to chat with them about their countries of origin. If we faced a difficulty, this connection created a cordial environment in which to deal with the problem.

We retired in South Florida, in part because it gave us easier access to areas of the world we hadn't traveled; all of South America, Jordan, Lebanon, and into and through Central Europe where we witnessed the bloom of entrepreneurship and democracy after decades of political and economic constraint.

After assignments in Madrid, Zaragoza and Rota, I finally learned to speak Spanish in Sarasota.

And that three-legged stool? Never did discover the third leg. But I did discover that with self-discipline, self-reliance and a bit of balance, you can get along pretty well.