

# Reflections at 74 at the Chalkface

**James W. Porcaro**

*Toyama Kokusai Gakuen*

In the movie *The Godfather Part III* (1990), at one point Don Altobello (played by Eli Wallach), the don of the Tattaglia crime family, tells Michael Corleone (Al Pacino), the don of the Corleone family, “I must accept my age, and grow my olives and tomatoes.” Like the don, I accept my age (74) though I have no intention of retiring from my profession, the more legitimate and socially redeeming one of teaching. Indeed, a former colleague who understood my intentions even many years ago once told me that I would not leave classroom teaching until “the last stub of chalk is wrested from your fingers.”

I simply love classroom teaching. James Lipton for more than a quarter of a century has asked all of the hundreds of guests on his *Inside the Actors Studio* TV program to respond to his Bernard Pivot/ Marcel Proust-based questionnaire in which the 10th and last question is, “If heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the pearly gates?” I answer this for myself first with the definitive one-word answer and gesture of actress Kathy Bates: “Safe!” Then I wish to hear, “James, welcome, your classroom is ready and your students are eagerly waiting for you.”

In recent years most of my published writing has been reflective

pieces. Critical narrative inquiry of my professional practice has been an essential and deeply valued means for me to understand and assert more clearly and profoundly the meaning of the work I have done for more than fifty years. Such reflection can lead us to realizations of what we do and who we are, as we construct and appreciate both our professional and personal identities. Furthermore, it enables us to continue to pursue ever more growth and development in our professional craft and personal lives. My reflective writing has been very instrumental in my maintaining a very strong commitment to classroom teaching and enhancing the enjoyment and satisfaction that come with it.

At times the thoughts of various other skilled practitioners on their work have been catalysts for my own reflective inquiry. The practice of the “dog whisperer”, Cesar Millan, has helped me to clarify my approach to class management (J. Porcaro, 2018a). The insight of an English Shakespearean actor, Rory Kinnear, on his craft illuminated my own drive to continually seek and discover more that I can put into every aspect of my classroom practice (J. Porcaro, 2018b). The instruction of clinical psychologist Dr. Jordan Peterson, that the path to meaning is responsibility, has helped me to put in place the meaning that has been inherent within the varied and particular times, places,

and socio-cultural circumstances of my teaching life (J. Porcaro, 2019).

My brother, Rob, is an optometrist by profession and a master woodcraftsman by avocation. His work has been exhibited in premier venues and he is a widely published author and teacher, and writes an award-winning blog (<http://www.rpwoodwork.com/blog>). Though I am not a craftsman of any sort, from time to time I read his blog and other writings for insight that may stimulate critical reflection on my own teaching craft (Porcaro, 2018a).

Following is an account of an actual personal episode of reflective inquiry, a short thought but one very important for me. It starts from my reading one of Rob's published articles, goes on to our email communication, with my uncertainties that follow, then to the interjection of a discomforting thought from another source, and to the end my unsettled mind on the matter.

A few years ago he wrote a short piece (R. Porcaro, 2016) for *Wood*, the most widely read woodworking magazine, in which he encourages woodworkers to take hold of their creative idea for a project and actually make it. "Making real things is done in the real world with all its disappointing limitations" (p. 22), he advises. Woodworkers must overcome any hesitations to do so. Though "it won't be perfect or exactly the way you envisioned it, it will be" (p. 22).

In conclusion, Rob adds: "When you have finished your work ...,

whether excellent or just fair, the piece now has a life of its own... [N]ow everything hopefully seems right unto itself at whatever level the work was done, including the imperfections and the doubts... Deal with limitations, do the best you can, and accept the result for what it is. Above all, make something...[and] the thing that you make is" (p. 23).

That word "doubts" struck me and I asked Rob about it. Indeed he was referring to the inner conflict the maker deals with as to whether he is good enough to make the piece and can accept something that is less than perfect. Though doubts may always be there, in the end, more than the piece "is", I suggested, it is yours and you own it.

Rob replied: "Just as I'm finishing a piece there is a moment when I realize it isn't mine anymore. Sure, it is in the sense that I made it, but the most distinct feeling is that the thing is on its own. It doesn't need me anymore, I can't change it anymore, and I feel separated from it. Sometime later I look at it and almost wonder who made it and, more unsettlingly, how."

I have always felt that part of the intrinsic meaning for my work is that I own it all. I never use a coursebook. I set all of my own course syllabuses and I make all of my teaching materials and instructional decisions. I take full responsibility for the teacher I am and the outcomes of my instruction. Now, from Rob's comment, I wonder about a

transformation that takes place in the status of ownership of what we do or make.

I have cherished the privileged classroom experiences I have had over many decades. I have had a great run in my career and I am very grateful for it all. I have always loved my classroom work and my relations with the students. Though I do my job the best I can for the benefit of my students, that benefit, in fact, may often be vague and obscure. I have been in this for myself as much as for anyone or anything else. Indeed, for my work I must rely on the meaning that I make for myself from the instruction itself that I give and from the existential yet necessarily ephemeral engagement with the students in the classroom.

I try to make the day a good one and look to make tomorrow one too. When there are no more tomorrows for me to be in the classroom, I am not sure what follows, not certain what remains of my ownership of what I have done. In *The Economist* (2019) obituary for the famed film-maker Agnès Varda who died at 90, the writer said that she had never lost her sense of wonder. “All those memories and realisations that made up her life would fade away unless she kept voyaging through new landscapes, meeting new people, looking and listening and constantly rebuilding the world out of sheer curiosity.”

I must wonder now if all of my own memories and realizations from the classroom experiences that make

up my professional and personal identity will fade away and be over. Perhaps that is a fear that in part keeps me from retiring from classroom teaching to plant tomatoes in my garden.

## References

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## Author Bio

**James W. Porcaro** is retired from his previous position as university professor and now teaches as a part-timer at a junior college and high school. He has master’s degrees in TESOL and African Area Studies. He started teaching more than 50 years ago in Uganda, taught for many years in Los Angeles, and has been teaching in Japan since 1985. He has published many articles on his work in a wide variety of areas including, Japanese-to-English literary translation, English for Science and Technology, teaching African Studies, and teaching English in high school.

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