

Chapter 4: Developmental Foundations

Introduction on Form

Starting in this chapter, the chronology of historical events and activities will appear in standard format double-spaced; the autoethnographic and contextualized reflective material will appear single-spaced and indented. This style choice is intended to help the reader identify the primary autoethnographic portions of the study. The historical sections set the conditions for observation while the autoethnographic sections synthesize the data into the critical thinking that has led to many of the foundational constructs of Lovewell Institute and the Lovewell Method.

Early History: The Seeds are Planted

When I reflect upon the origins of Lovewell Institute, my own development as an artist is inextricable from the early development of the methodology. The following historiography will examine the roots of Lovewell Institute and the Lovewell Method as they intertwined with the roots of my personal conscious and unconscious creative development during the formative years. Certain sections of this and the following chapters will appear in an Arial font, single-spaced, indented format to indicate the more reflexive autoethnographic discoveries I have made as I look retrospectively at the early developmental period.

As a child growing up in the small isolated agricultural community of Belleville, Kansas, I felt a strong sense of destiny. Even though it was a kid's version of destiny, I envisioned a future involving the arts, deeper levels of communication, and education that has endured the test of time and is still the foundation of my life plan. My mother told me she knew that from an early age I was always reaching out beyond the city limits of my small hometown. She joined a record club that specialized in illustrated books

accompanied by well-performed classical music. We did not have a television until I was 5 years old, so those early years were filled listening to music, creating characters, scripts, costumes, and sets for elaborate puppet shows and building three-dimensional still-life scenarios out of blocks and miniature animals and human figures that I then photographed.

Bible stories intrigued me but I was never quite satisfied with the explanations of my Sunday school teachers concerning God, Jesus, and how all those miracles happened. I often interrogated them on theological issues to the point of mutual frustration. And who were these religious figures we never talked about in Kansas such as Buddha and Mohammed? Vague allusions and textbook explanations only made me more determined to find some spiritual answers that made sense. Was spiritual truth as arbitrary as grown ups made it seem? I cannot help wonder if I am genetically predisposed toward spiritual questioning. My great great grandfather, Christian Schwendener, emigrated from Switzerland in 1846 and was a Calvinist evangelist in Wisconsin and Minnesota before moving his family to Kansas. Perhaps inspired by him, over the course of my life I explored many religions, and it seems that my quest keeps leading me further inward for answers. It continues to be a fulfilling journey with no end in sight and most definitely a major theme being played out in this lifetime.

Some of my earliest memories are of sneaking off after Sunday school to a small room in the church basement with an old pump organ that bellowed out a terrific sound if the feet pedaled fast enough and one learned to pull out the right stops. I felt like the little "Phantom of the Church" as I composed music that rattled the door and soon led my parents straight to my secret hiding place. Seeing my interest in music, my mother bought an old piano from the church for \$5 and stored it in our garage. After the piano had been

painted, and repainted, things got a bit more serious. I came home from the Blair Theatre every Saturday and played the movie themes on the old piano. My mother, hopeful that she might have discovered a prodigy, immediately signed me up for piano lessons with my Great Aunt Florence. Florence was an accomplished trained musician and a very sweet woman. The problem was that it took her a long time to realize that I was not reading the notes. I would ask her to play the new song several times and then I memorized the way it sounded.

Playing by ear was a gift and a nemesis. I preferred writing my own songs to struggling through the theory books and endless finger exercises. However, as the music I encountered became more complex and extended, it became necessary for me to buckle down and get the basics (learn to read the notes; learn and apply the theory). I spent the next 30 years exploring the balance between learning to follow the rules and breaking them to pioneer new ideas and to find (and develop) my own style. The interplay between tradition and innovation was to become a major theme in my life.

This was my first encounter with learning style issues. The feeling that I was not a “normal learner” would follow me all of my life and would eventually become a theme of the Lovewell Method. Now I can look back and say that I was clearly a visual and auditory learner (Gardner, 1993, 1999) who listened to the contours and textures of the music and watched the hand positions on the keyboard rather than reading the notes on the paper. Aunt Florence was gentle in her punishments but future teachers would not be so understanding. The teachers thought the issue was that I did not like to practice. The truth is that I sat at the piano for hours playing music that I heard in my head. I would listen and watch my fingers and eventually, when I was satisfied, reproduce the music over and over just as if every note had been written down. Subsequently, I did learn how to read and write music. The Lovewell Method now embraces students who learn best through a variety of learning styles and, through those entry points, find motivation to expand their knowledge concentrically outward to include larger aspects of the discipline.

There was another defining moment in those developmental years. Once again, this experience did not involve school or an organized curriculum. It was just every day

life offering an opportunity to learn and grow. When I was 9 years old, my father purchased a barren little piece of prairie on the proposed shoreline of a lake being built by the Kansas Corps of Engineers as an irrigation project. The concept was to flood a valley that unfortunately had the small town of Lovewell situated at the bottom. Some called it “big damn foolishness,” while others were thankful for the irrigation opportunities during those hot and dry Kansas summers. It was to be called Lovewell Lake. A section of the shoreline was reserved for privately owned cabins for those landlocked Kansans who enjoyed fishing, boating, swimming, and water skiing. I asked my parents if I could design the cabin. They wanted to see what I came up with before any commitments were made. I went to work furiously measuring, cutting cardboard, and finally building a model to scale of a compact two-bedroom, two-story cabin. Much to my amazement, my father and I built the cabin (almost exactly to the model I designed). It was a thrilling opportunity to track the whole creative process of that cabin from conception through physical manifestation, from the idea to the reality. I saw and felt evidence of my creative power. I experimented with organizational techniques. I learned about the importance of patience and collaboration in a large-scale project. The cabin is still standing on the shores of Lovewell Lake. This empowering experience at a young age became a cornerstone of the Lovewell Method.

On our family trips to the lake, we would drive past a schoolhouse situated on a bluff overlooking the former town of Lovewell now at the bottom of the lake. It was a bit eerie seeing this handsome brick building complete with gym, offices, second floor classrooms, and a cafeteria with a stage sitting alone and isolated like a sentinel on the vast empty prairie. This stark vision of potential concentrated and focused learning in a peaceful, naturalistic environment made a deep impression on me.

One of the most frequently asked questions about Lovewell Institute is “Where did the organization get the name?” Obviously, spending reflective time as a child in a structure that I had designed and helped build translated into significant creative empowerment. The name Lovewell represented that experience to me. Sensing that the concept of Lovewell was larger than me, I decided that it was neither wise nor prudent to use my own name in the title of the organization or the methodology.

The cabin-on-the-lake story was only one interpretation of why I wanted to name the organization Lovewell Institute for the Creative Arts. The alternative and more metaphysical interpretation appealed to me because it would serve as a reminder of the social and spiritual implications of the philosophy underlying the Lovewell organization and method: to love well.

There were also some stimulating opportunities offered during school hours. I was the conductor of my kindergarten rhythm band. I know it does not sound like a big deal, but in Belleville, Kansas (population 2,000), it was a big deal. We had uniforms and hats; wonderful instruments that made all kinds of sounds; public concerts; and, best of all, a teacher dedicated and committed to making sense of all that banging and thumping. Ironically, her name was Miss Whipp. She taught my father and my brother and, knowing some of my family history, she was not going to let me get away with anything. In spite of my esteemed position as the conductor of the rhythm band, she made me sit in the corner with a dunce hat for failure to keep my mouth shut. I appreciate Miss Whipp more every time I think about her.

As I progressed through elementary school, I took part in every chorus, band, and drama event offered. In middle school, my choice of trumpet in the marching band was denied. They needed trombones and I had long arms so I played trombone. Meanwhile, during those years, I saw several films that made lasting impressions. Among the standouts were *Porgy and Bess* (Gershwin, Heyward, & Nash, 1959), *Oklahoma* (Rodgers & Hammerstein, 1955), *Can Can* (Porter & Burrows, 1960), and the classic *Wizard of Oz* (Baum, Arlen, Langley, & Harburg, 1939). At the Blair Theatre, a

purchased ticket was good all day. Consequently, I attended the first show in the early afternoon and watched the movie over and over until I had to be home for dinner. By the time I arrived home, I was filled with the songs, the characters, the dialogue, and the sense that I took a long and magical journey to another time and place. I wanted to know how these things were put together. What did it take to create a story that moved and delighted the audience on so many levels? How did all that talent, creativity, and technology come together to create those artistic masterpieces?

New worlds were opening up that I had never known. “Interdisciplinary” had not yet entered my vocabulary, but I was already absorbing and integrating the concept. I remember asking my parents where they made all that magic; I knew it had to be a long way away from Kansas. They said all of the major music, theatre, movie, and artistic projects were produced in either New York or Hollywood. I remember wondering if it was some sort of cruel joke that I was born and stuck in an isolated little farm town in the middle of Kansas, as far away from either New York and Hollywood as one small aspiring interdisciplinary artist could get. The yellow brick road did not run by my house.

When I was 13 years old, there was a dramatic change in my life situation that swept me into a new arena of challenges and opportunities. My parents went through an intense and painful divorce. Suddenly, literally overnight, I was “the man of the house.” My mother and I moved to a slightly larger farm town in Kansas where her mother and sister lived. Salina had a community theatre, a youth symphony, modern dance classes at the local college, and a modest foreign film series. I was soon involved with all of them. My world and my consciousness of the arts were expanding. I had to make some choices. I was on the football and track teams. As our football team’s Captain of the Year in seventh grade, I began to take a real interest in sports. But there I was in a larger town with all these new cultural opportunities. I was so busy between school, sports, and outside arts activities that I could not do all the things I wanted to do. Something was going to have to be eliminated. My grandfather, father, and older brother were renowned

athletes in our area, winning medals, praise, and scholarships to the point of starting a family tradition and expectations of male sports achievers. This included football, basketball, baseball, track, shooting (guns not film), racing, and hunting (fishing was too passive). With my brother off to college, and my father no longer in my daily life, I was free to break away from the mold and pursue my real passion--the creative process and expressing a social vision through the arts.

I quit football, stopped trying out for sports teams, and concentrated on music, theatre, dance, and design. This decision was at the same time liberating and terrifying. Dr. Parker was a wonderful instrumental music instructor who allowed me to branch out from my trombone into other instruments such as French horn during concert season and string bass in the orchestra. Knowing my artistic aspirations, Dr. Parker asked me to sing selections from classic American musicals at our concerts. It was exhilarating to stand up and deliver a song with a live 50-piece orchestra at the age of 15.

This was also the era of great comedy albums; LPs with sketches written and performed by Bob Newhart, the Smothers Brothers, Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Shelly Berman, and other popular comedians. I memorized these routines and performed them for school assemblies and social gatherings. It was great fun and a chance to get the feel of live comedy and a live audience.

This was when an awareness of the communicative power of live performance entered my consciousness. The audience was there to be entertained, informed, and enlightened. If the performing artist did not deliver material clearly and engage the audience, everyone knew it and there would be consequences. "Delivering the material" and "engaging the audience" are skills that apply equally to the art of acting and the art of educating. I learned that the power of the pen was paralleled by the power of the stage. I saw that people wanted something that they could relate to, get involved with, and laugh at, and learn from. These were great lessons for a teenage boy whose parents had just split up and who needed to create realities that were manageable, benevolent, and laced with humor. This experience and knowledge has transferred into the Lovewell Method,

and over the years I have witnessed many students in Lovewell programs who have benefited from the arts emotionally, intellectually, and socially in the same way that I did.

I spent several long sessions in the Salina Middle School assistant principal's office trying to convince him to let me take more arts courses ("Why can't I take chorus *and* orchestra *and* journalism instead of vocational shop, Latin, and algebra?"). These were battles I seldom won, but I did get a certain satisfaction in attempting to construct a solid argument for a young artist with a focused agenda. I knew what I wanted but the academic administrators seemed to know what I needed. Some things never change.

While in Salina, I started performing locally with two musical groups: The Starbounders (a folk trio) and The Intruders (a rock group). With many public performances for each group, I had the opportunity to present my music in every Moose Club, Lions Club, Elks Club, and Knights of Columbus in central Kansas. It was a great education in rehearsal techniques, scheduling, time management, human relations, logistics, collaboration, changing flat tires, quick costume changes, and a number of other skills that would prove useful over the years. During this time, Lieutenant Governor Harold Chase of Kansas asked me to write the theme song for his gubernatorial campaign. Our folk trio toured 300 Kansas villages playing the campaign song and other popular favorites at political rallies and public gatherings. We traveled with Lieutenant Governor Chase and his entourage for several months. It was a real slice of Americana mixed with politics, popular culture, and entertainment that introduced me to a whole new world of possibilities.

Relocation took me to Denver when I was 15 years old. My mother enrolled me in George Washington High School, which had a fine choral music department run by Violette McCarthy (only interested in opera), a fine instrumental music program run by a

trumpet player (only interested in band music), and a fine English department with an extraordinary teacher (only interested in Shakespeare). By the time I was a senior in high school, I was bold enough and still young and stupid enough to attempt the impossible--to write, direct, and perform in a school-wide original production. Interdisciplinary was not yet a popular word, but the high school needed a spring show and the talent came in all varieties. In hindsight, it is easy to see the path that was clearly unfolding for me.

Until that time, George Washington High School had made numerous half-hearted attempts to produce an annual All School Show. It was open to almost anyone with enough audacity to prepare something for audition and perform it onstage. It was a “fend for yourself” variety show and garnered very little interest or support from the student body or faculty. I proposed my idea for a centennial celebration of the Broadway musical to the respective teachers and promised to take on all the responsibilities they would give me. They liked the idea and permitted me to run with it. I did the research and created *A Century on Broadway* (Spangler, 1966) that followed the development of the American Musical Theatre from its inception in 1866 through 1966. Talented students performed pieces in all styles from all eras of the Broadway musical. Word got around about our show, and a local television station featured us as a “junior achievers” news story (Channel 7, 1966).

The show was an unqualified success that galvanized the student body and, for the first time, generated school spirit in the arts to a level that rivaled sports. There was an unprecedented cast party, a feeling of pride and accomplishment, and a new standard of cooperation between the various arts components of George Washington High School. It was very encouraging that the teachers had trusted me with the idea and empowered me to carry it off. There were some tense moments during the final rehearsals, but we all

gained more respect for each other and the creative process by the time the audience left the theatre.

This was the prototype of what would eventually develop into the Lovewell experience. It was the first time I witnessed the potential positive energy generated by an interdisciplinary arts event centered on the interests and proficiencies of teenagers. The artistic achievement was deeply gratifying, but the social and leadership aspects were equally inspiring to me. It was my first taste of learner-centered arts education. I was so wrapped up in the work, activities, and emotions that I was not able to process it as a budding methodology. I now can see that it was the kind of all-encompassing peak experience that begged for further examination. It was my first lesson in how an interdisciplinary arts event could positively influence the morale and cohesiveness of an arts program, a school, and a community.

The high school college counselor saw our show and decided to take a personal interest in my college admissions process. Even though I had already received notice of a music scholarship to Colorado University, he researched the top national theatre and music schools and set up an audition for me at CMU. I traveled to Pittsburgh for the audition and was accepted into both the music and theatre departments. Because CMU was not yet a leader in cross-disciplinary studies, I would soon have to make a decision.

While enrolled in my senior year in high school, I auditioned and got a part in an ongoing professional production of *The Highlights of Broadway* (McHale, 1966) at a popular Denver dinner theatre. We performed 11 shows each week, and I was very pleased to join the American Guild of Variety Artists and to be saving some money for college doing a job I enjoyed. I arranged my school schedule with a study hall last period from which I got excused. There was a school policy stating that good grades and a regular job qualified a student for skipping study hall. I would go home, take a nap in the afternoon, and work Tuesday through Saturday evenings from 7:00 p.m. until after midnight. The value of this experience was that I was working with dedicated professionals in the areas of music, theatre, and dance. Bill McHale was the local

entrepreneur who produced and directed the shows. At this time, he also founded the Denver Academy of Theatre Arts. As a performer in his productions, I received scholarships to the academy in acting and dance. I quickly realized the dedication and commitment a professional career required. My circle of friends now included professional actors, singers, dancers, musicians, and theatrical technicians. This was not the high school crowd.

While in Denver, I recorded my first record for CLW Records entitled *Near Me* (Spangler, 1964). It was a small local studio and label that hired me to play piano for their other recording acts in return for releasing a single (two sides) of my own. It was small-time stuff but it fueled big-time dreams. My father's words from years before echoed in my head: "You'll never be able to support a family if you go into music."

That admonishment became more of a curse than a warning. My father was not supportive of my artistic pursuits until near the end of his life. After the record was pressed, I took some copies back to Kansas where he lived. His parents had owned and operated jukeboxes in central Kansas and it seemed appropriate that I surprise him with a song of my own on the old jukebox at the local truck stop. I asked him if I could borrow a dime, dropped it in the slot, and watched his face as he listened to my first record. When I reminded him that he had once commented that he would rather listen to a jukebox than hear me play the piano, he did not remember ever saying it. And those echoes of his warning that a life in the arts would mean poverty linger years after his death. I am still not totally clear about what effect my parents' divorce had on me or the formation of Lovewell, but I do know that many students in the Lovewell workshops are from broken homes and find value in having the opportunity to express their feelings regarding divorce and dysfunctional family experiences. Numerous Lovewell productions have featured songs, scenes, or characters focused on an examination of the consequences of divorce. The students have created some very powerful theatrical moments based on this theme.

My senior year of high school and the following summer passed very quickly. Soon, I was off to CMU in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Without any financial support from my family, I was also off to a very shaky start at a college career. I made the decision to register first for the music degree but include as many elective classes in theatre and film

as were allowed. My reasoning was that there are physical requirements and muscle memory issues involved in music training that could be more readily acquired at a younger age. CMU was not yet a leader in interdisciplinary studies or cross-curricular academics and at that time there was no cooperation between the theatre and music departments.

In retrospect, I realize that I had a substantial stage fright condition. My acting and performing experience had not improved the condition. I must have known intuitively that my stage fright would require time and processing on an emotional level. Even more importantly, I would soon realize that my authentic interest and passion were taking me beyond the performing arts (interpretative arts) to a level of increasing creative control by writing, directing, and producing--focusing more on content than interpretation (creative arts).

This was the beginning of my deeper level of observation regarding the difference between the *interpretive arts* and the *creative arts* (as explained in chapter 1). It was only the first stage of identifying the need to bring a better balance to the way the arts are perceived and taught in our culture. Beginning to feel the weight of this distinction, I was faced with choices that would force me in one direction or the other. Music, theatre, visual art, dance, social service, healing, spiritual development, education--where was the balance in combining those themes into a meaningful life? Why did I soon lose interest in initiatives that offered no creative challenge? The seeds were being planted for the conception of Lovewell Institute for the Creative Arts. I had greatly enjoyed my high school experience but I was ready to move on.