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Pages from Scholarly Life: The Snowman Melted

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Rather than write a book alone, as I had done in the past, I felt that if there was someone else to whom I was responsible, I would meet deadlines and accomplish more in the one-semester sabbatical than if I worked alone. Also, I felt that the book I wanted to write would be much richer with me pairing up with someone who had practiced school leadership longer than I did.

So I began to prepare for the sabbatical the summer before the academic year 2012-2013 by researching the topic of school leadership. My colleague and I decided to focus on the one aspect of school leadership which we felt impacted school improvement, Standard 2.0 of the Interstate Leadership Licensure Consortium standards. It reads: “An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” (ISLLC, 2008). The rationale for selecting this standard—nurturing and sustaining professional culture—emerged from our shared experiences in schools. We have seen the significant impact of healthy school cultures on the professional growth of our teachers and students, and on the parent body. When members of a school community are surrounded by a culture of excellence and care, they feel safe and are both more open to collaboration and more willing to take creative risks in their learning. Our book, we thought, would include vignettes drawn from actual school leadership experiences which pertain to Standard 2.0.

Since I had experience in preparing book proposals, I spent the entire summer of 2012 drafting the proposal, which included the following components: subject matter, scope and intended purpose of our manuscript; the anticipated manuscript length and intended readership; a detailed Table of Contents, including brief chapter summaries; and two sample chapters. Our proposal was immediately accepted in the fall of 2012 by a well-reputed publisher of K-12 and higher education topics, Rowman & Littlefield. Since I was not on sabbatical in the fall of 2012 and my co-author had just retired, she spent that semester writing vignettes based upon school leadership experiences. In between my teaching and Writing Across the Curriculum Assistant Coordinator responsibilities at Bridgewater State, I helped revise the vignettes and guide the research for our book. The vignette and the research go hand in hand.

I had intended to begin my writing as soon as the fall semester ended, which was the beginning of my sabbatical. I packed my Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA), my research articles, and everything I would need to write the book and headed for our family home in southwestern Vermont. I had every...
intention of doing what one of my colleagues in the Secondary Education and Professional Programs Department (SEPP) said he did on his sabbatical: write six hours daily.

Then it snowed in Vermont on December 23, 2012. And then the holidays were upon us. And then the children and grandchildren arrived. And then they left and the house was a mess and the laundry piled up and our head had melted and his twig arms had been bent sideways, his snowman was bent sideways, his snowman that my grandchildren and i looked out the window and saw the snowman I had built together during their visit. I was alone—alone on my sabbatical. Just what I had wanted. I was supposed to be alone, alone to write a book on school leadership. But being alone made me think about what was missing: my treasures, my mountain pals, my nature lovers, my explorers, my discoverers, my admirers and my inquisitors. The holidays were over. My grandchildren went home. It was time to get to work again on the book. I wanted to do that. I had planned for that. I even told my husband not to come to Vermont too often to be with me as I needed time to think, reflect and write.

I decided to use self-talk as a mechanism to motivate me. “You can do it … you can do it … you can do it. Just like the ‘Little Engine That Could.’” You can sit for six hours daily all alone during your sabbatical and write, write, write. So I began another month of solid reading, revising, researching, emailing and telephoning my co-author, who, after thirteen years as a school head in Massachusetts, had moved with her husband to Minnesota to be near her own grandchildren. Some days, I would sit and stare at the computer, go downstairs to eat something, go back to the computer, look outside at my neighbors riding horses past my house, wait for the school bus to bring the children home from school, wait for the mailman to reach out of his rusty old Subaru to put mail in my mailbox, run outside to get the mail and run back in to the computer. Every day was the same. Eat, look outside, drink some tea, eat again, write, think, revise, email my colleague, stare at the ski mountains facing my house, watch the cars go by and figure out who was going where. Then, refocus and write. Once I got started writing a vignette, the writing came easily because I was writing about what I had experienced. But it was the editing and revising that was agonizing.

At the end of February, my colleague and I had finished all of our writing. To our surprise, we were ahead of our self-imposed timeline. But now came the difficult job of sorting, drafting the end-of-chapter bullet points, creating titles for our vignettes, matching our vignettes with the proposed chapters, updating references, selecting which vignettes best conveyed which topic and verifying that our writing included the national issues in school leadership for 2013.

I had been taking my work seriously. One morning, when I diverted my attention away from the book, I felt the need to reconnect with my family. And so, I looked at the empty Pack n’ Play in the next bedroom. And I looked at the photos over the fireplace. And I looked at the small pink skis in the ski closet and the three small pairs of blue snowshoes in the mud room. I looked at the frozen pond which had a snow-blown path and tiny toddler-made boot prints. And I felt a cramp of nostalgia in my stomach. That cramp triggered a tear in my eye.

Later that day, I snowshoed up the mountain, looking at the various animal tracks, paw prints left in the cupboards were bare. They ate all of our food! And to think I had been to the grocery store almost every day for a period of two weeks. I had no time to think, let alone write! But I would not let myself be deterred by all of this. So I sat down and wrote and wrote, read and read, reflected and reflected some more. I began to spend four hours daily on my book project. People called me to ski, to snowshoe, to walk, and to go to exercise classes. I said no to all of them. I was there to write. My husband came to spend time with me and I just sat at the computer.

One day, at the end of January, after an intense three-week period of solid writing, I looked at my new iPhone and saw the photo of my smiling four-month-old granddaughter. She seemed to be looking intensely at me, understanding the depth of my love for her. I looked out the window and saw the snowman that my grandchildren and I had built together during their visit. The snowman was bent sideways, his head had melted and his twig arms had fallen beside him in the snow. His eyes, stones, lay in the snow. Even his trunk had melted, giving him a look of a snowman with only one hip. I laughed. And when I remembered how he was constructed, my eyes filled with tears. My construction management team had departed from the mountains of Vermont. I was alone—alone on my sabbatical.

The benefit of a sabbatical, in addition to being a hiatus from teaching, is that it is a time to reflect and work on scholarly endeavors.
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