Week by Week, Hour by Hour
(A Teacher’s Journal of a General Studies Course)

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The confused motorist stopped by the watermelon stand on a dusty back road in Eastern Kansas. The weather was July-drip. The sunny kind of drip, the kind where the only drip is trickling down from a wet slot on your shirt to where your belt bunches the shirt up on your hips. "How do you get to Topeka?" said the tourist. The reply from an old man in overalls, "If I was you, Mister, I sure as hell wouldn't start from here."

There isn't anyplace else to start, except from where you are, on a trip. So, I'm going to ask you to go with me on a trip through a part of a course entitled Post Freudian Thought. It's a general studies course at Western Michigan University. My notion is that many of us who are teaching interdisciplinary courses on the undergraduate level have the feeling that our description of the work we are attempting, the journey we are taking, that we always are starting at the wrong place, maybe on the wrong foot.

I want very much to talk about my work, and so, wrong place or not, I'm just going to take you with me, hour by hour through a portion of this course. To do so for the whole course might be tedious. We will begin, then, at the start of the second of two main blocks of the course, centering around Erikson's thoughts on Identity.

A Chautauqua: Post Freudian Thought

The goal of our trip? To understand what Erikson means by the word Identity and hopefully to use that notion to clarify an identity search on
the part of the students, each one taken individually.

First Week

First class. It had to come, I know. Here we are in the middle of February. We've had fun so far in the course studying and sharing Viktor Frankl's will to meaning and seeing parallels to Frankl's ways for finding meaning in a rather roisterous novel by Clair Huffaker called *Nobody Loves a Drunken Indian*. But I know that the moment of truth has arrived, for Erikson's book on youth and identity is difficult reading. I don't know whether this class, taking the course to fulfill a General Studies requirement, will do the digging required to find what that wise old man has to say about youth. The first chapter of the book is assigned according to the sheet I have given them for reading throughout the school year. And so, I walk into Room 4510 Dunbar, a few minutes after one P.M. Often I feel a tingle when I walk in to class, reminiscent of the bell starting the initial round of a boxing match. No more planning or worrying, "you're on!"

I walk up to the desk, rummage through my brief case for last class's corrected test, my horrendously large 60-page, typed outline of Erikson's book, and my scribbled plans for today's class. Up to the board to write in my left-handed scrawl, two questions:

1. Does Erikson equate "crisis" with disaster?
2. Name one of the two conceptual ancestors of Erikson's notion of "Identity".

The answers are to be brief — during the five minutes they are pondering and writing, I prowl the classroom... there are some faces that are familiar, but the names? I take a fix on two or three faces — look down at the piece of paper on the lecture chair in front of them, and attempt to attach the name to the face. They are finished now, half-sheets of paper work their way to the front of the room where I gather them into a single stack. Looks like they have read the first chapter anyhow, except for Dennis Smith, who looks blank in his chair in the back of the room. Does he have a book? Did the bookstore run out? Did he just decide "the hell with it?"

We spent nearly the whole class sharing two of the early writers on identity, both quoted by Erikson in the chapter. William James' letter to his wife I shall quote in part here:

A man's character is discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: "THIS is the real me!"

It was a good session. The students were loose enough to share experiences parallel to James'. Britt Theuer, a musician, describes his experience of feeling really himself when he is playing the trumpet. I cajole, wait and comment. Picking up on the thread of James' thought I point out that this feeling or voice does not guarantee that Britt will be a great trumpet player, it is a feeling of active tension, a time when one is willing to take a risk. Often such a voice speaks within us when we least expect it. I remember my own experience when I first began to teach high school — something inside told me that this was where I belonged, in the classroom — and oh, the surprise of it! I did not expect to find myself there nor hear that voice. Teaching was a part of my training as a Jesuit, and so I went.
Not everybody heard that voice that year in Kansas City, 1956.
And so we shared experiences — for nearly an hour and a half, students speaking, shyly, almost warily, many of them. When it seemed that we had run out of responses to James’ description, we went on to Freud’s comments on his debt to Judaism. I shall quote again:

What bound me to Jewry was (I am ashamed to admit) neither faith nor national pride, for I have always been an unbeliever and was brought up without any religion though not without a respect for what are called “ethical” standards of civilization . . . there was a perception that it was to my Jewish nature alone that I owed two characteristics that had become indispensable to me in the difficult course of my life. Because I was a Jew I found myself free from many prejudices which restricted others in the use of their intellect; and as a Jew I was prepared to join the Opposition, and to do without agreement with the “compact majority”.

Again the shy testimonies, I remember Larry Bolton describing his own Jewishness in terms similar to Freud’s. Somehow his affiliation with Jewry made him feel he did not need the agreement of the majority of his peers. He talked of his freedom from certain kinds of prejudice as a part of his heritage. Larry talked to me later about a family of Georgia rednecks whom he greatly admires — country folk, given to making generalizations about “niggers” — but Larry sees another side to them. Maybe it does help to be Jewish!

It’s over now — a long class of an hour and fifty minutes with no breaks, but a good one. The time seemed to go fast and I didn’t have to talk too much.

Second class. The assignment was Erikson’s second chapter. It concerns the basic tasks of the ego — as a central organizing agency absorbing historical, biological, and social data for the individual person.

Given a short test on the meaning of ego, somehow the direction of sharing takes a historical bent. Pete Kane and Steve Francis both talk of the history of their time in Viet Nam. Both functioned well for their country as soldiers. Steve was, as he put it, “blown up” — I didn’t realize how literal a term that is. He was leaning over a live hand grenade in the dark when it detonated. The point of both men — they were set to come home as heroes for their country — one a hospital case, the other a proud young man. Both were greeted by no one. They were organized to be heroes from their own personal histories at war. This “history” made it damned hard to adjust . . . to being just ordinary Joes in civilian life. As Pete said, “It was terribly confusing.”

I talked briefly concerning Erikson’s conviction that exploited people usually accepting the image given them by their exploiters. There is a history of this — both personal and familial among black people in our country. If people say that black people are shiftless niggers for long enough the ego will organize this data as acceptable. I noticed the small minority of black students I have in class nodding their heads. They said nothing.

Sharing centered around family and school. If your teachers have always thought you were dumb and told you so, well, there is a good chance you will believe them. If your mother thinks your older brother is the smart one in the family, you’ll probably believe her too. These are
historical aspects in ego development. I'm intent on the class seeing this time element, a developing and dynamic way of looking at the ego.

After class Pam Colen quietly came up to me and said, "Mr. Gross, when you were explaining the class project that we have to do, you mentioned two of the best you ever got were not written — one a dance of some Eriksonian theory; the other a series of drawings of faces showing Erikson's developmental stages. Did you say that the two best projects you ever got were done by black people?" I looked Pam in the eye, not remembering that I had said anything about race in connection with the projects. "That's right, Pam." That mixture of surprise and pleasure in a young woman's face was born of a history of hearing things differently. She should have taught the class.

Second Week

First class. I'm not going to teach today — just turn them loose tracing Erikson's eight stages of personhood — from cradle to grave. They've read it, I hope. I'm not worried so much about working with groups anymore. Some of the shock of helping one another in a "test" is over. The group getting the same grade, each one for the test — they are used to that. I hope they are ready — the task: in an hour and fifty minutes groups of four to six must define each stage, give an example of each, find Erikson's supporting institution, and his motto for each.

Off they go. I feel up tight with nothing to do at first. I start watching the groups. One group is into making up their own mottoes for each stage — not rebellion, just their style, what the group researches call "risky shift." This observation is a reminder for me to sit down, draw a map of the room with each group identified in it, and observe. The group at the far left close to my desk has a guy pulled way back from the others — he's not into the project. I note that. Another group of four right in front of me are pulled so close together in their lecture chairs they look like a four-leafed clover — something doing there. Way in the back I notice two women looking out the window vacantly. And so I work my observation round the room — and then start again. I remember groups change — next observation has my guy who was pulled way back in closer. Later I discover the smokers in his group were bothering him — it took a while but they needed him. The groups keep changing — I make my notes on my second mental tour, not actually hearing what they are saying, but watching seating, eyes, how loud they are talking, whether there are any laughs.

I'm off now — touring the room, one group at a time. I tell them what I have noticed. The noise level is high, not just a buzz. "Hey Frank!", "Do we have this right?" or "Leave us alone, Frank, we've got a good thing going here." What was an orderly tour becomes me actively scooting around the room. I spend some time with groups who are lost — needling, questioning, waiting for them to tell me to get lost, because I'm using up their time.

Back to the desk and my class list — I know students more and more now by what group they tend to be in. It's interesting to see floaters. They are often the ones that don't come to class much or don't do the reading. They aren't too welcome, so they shift from class to class, from group to group. It does put pressure on them to come and to read. Is that fair? I'm not sure. Suddenly the period is coming to a close. I tell them to type the
papers and xerox a copy for each in the group ... and they are gone.

Second class. They are back, most with xeroxed copies, so I go carefully through the whole exercise myself out loud. Students sit separately, making notes, groaning, questioning my way of looking at the eight stages, but they are paying attention — except those poor souls who weren’t here last time. Somehow I feel sorry for them. It is possible to be sick or bored or just to be upset — and hence missing from an important class. Going over something a student hasn’t done can make them feel even more out of it.

A brief test on the assigned reading for today. We are starting the Catcher in the Rye, so I suggest how Holden Caulfield’s life might have gone, partly from the book we have started, partly from imagination, for The Catcher gives us only a few days in the life of a young man in an Identity crisis. That’s why we are taking the book. I want the students to come up for air and enjoy the book, but to deepen what they have learned by watching, laughing, and crying with a young man from the vantage point of Erikson. Hopefully, the novel form of literature will bring them a step closer to applying the theory to themselves.

Finishing touch — for the last fifteen minutes of the period we do a body sculpture of Holden. It’s a simple exercise. We push back the chairs, put everybody in the middle of the room standing close together. Then some volunteer arranges hands and bodies into a sculpture representing Holden. Marguerite, who has a son at Michigan State, arranges one fellow sitting in the middle, a ring of others making gestures of despair, another ring of bodies around them reaching out with their arms and hands. She acts surely, slowly the group sees what she is about — Holden’s terrible loneliness combined with his inability to accept intimacy. Three or four other sculptors try their hands at it ... but not with the care of Marguerite — she is thinking of her own son surely; it shows.

As they leave, I wonder if they see the connection between The Catcher and Erikson’s theory.

Third Week

First class. The middle section of The Catcher. I think they are enjoying the book. Somehow it doesn’t bother me anymore that some may have read it before. My students for the most part have read very little. That’s one of the reasons for my using novels — it’s never too late to discover the fun and potential wisdom of a well written book.

We are looking forward to Erikson’s treatment of Identity crisis now, but I don’t tell the students. I put seven key words on the board, taken from the book, that nearly correspond to the key headings in Erikson’s treatment and call for small groups to give examples. The words: any Salinger fan will recognize a few of them — phony, sex, student, Old Jesus, Old Spencer and history, “I really am.” I’m leading up to Erikson’s categories of time as allied to trust, sexual polarization, the importance of ideology, the need to follow or lead effectively, role experimentation, having a feeling of apprenticeship, the need for self-certainty.

Put in other terms: Holden has a desperate need to trust someone, but he has been betrayed often. Almost everyone is phony to him who has been betrayed. His preoccupation with his own sex and with homosexuals shows a yet unsettled feeling for what kind of male he is. As a student, he is locked into one role — that of a professional flunker. His deep
feeling for Jesus reflects his idealism, indeed his ideology. His en-
counter with his history teacher, Spencer, shows his despair at doing
anything well. The oft repeated “I really am” implies that he really
isn’t sure of what you the reader really thinks of him. But I don’t
want to get all that clinical — I want students to find Holden as
he is. If they do, likely enough they’ll see something of themselves.
We’ll leave Erikson for later.

After putting the words on the black board, I ask each group to
brainstorm for fifteen minutes. Write down any associations they may
make between these words and the book. After this they can argue out
which ones seem most apt to the words and episodes in this book.

It takes TIME! Suddenly there’s only fifteen minutes of class time left.
I had hoped to have them do picture posters of Holden in groups, cutting
out photos from magazines and pasting them, collage-like, on paper back-
ing. Maybe next semester I’ll be more organized. My black suitcase with
magazines, rubber glue, scissors, backing, and two-way tape for mounting
the posters on the wall weighs fifty pounds! Back to the office with it —
ugh!

Second class. We have finished reading the saga of Holden Caulfield,
and so today I throw a chincy, twenty question fill-in test, taken individu-
ally, at the class. I know they don’t learn much from this sort of exercise.
Why do it? I do need to know who is doing the work in the groups, those
who are doing the reading. Something down deep in me tells me that this
is only an excuse. Tests that are not learning exercises bother me. My next
dilemma — after correcting it later I find that everybody got almost all the
answers right. Well, they ARE reading. That’s good, I hope.

After the fifteen minutes for the test we spent an hour and a
half running through all the crises of adolescence explained by my
friend Erikson as they happen to Holden. I explained each one, the
students, in large group session picked out examples. They were
lively! The time went quickly. What I do not know — will the
whole damned thing stay a nice, neat exercise, carefully desegregated
from their lives. “Class, today’s puzzle is how to make a freaky kid
in a novel fit into a developmental psychoanalytical model about
adolescent and young adult identity crisis.” Source of Hope — I
think they like Holden, many of them. Can “like” be a word close
to “identify with?”

Fourth Week

In seventeenth century European Jesuit Colleges, those famous
schools that produced Voltaire, one always “prelected” the lesson.
They still do that! I can’t resist thinking that James Joyce and
Fidel Castro graduated from Jesuit schools of a later date. You see,
“prelecting” means teaching something before you assign it, but it
may help understanding too. I cannot ask my illustrious alumni just
now, but I have been prelecting the actual reading of Erikson’s
Chapter on Identity Confusion by means of my wistful adolescent
in his field of rye.

And so — to it. Both periods this week will be spent by the students
working on that chapter I hope they have read. We have worked so hard
on learning the rules of group consensus — What must they do?

1. Define in their own words each of the seven aspects of adolescent and young adult identity crisis.
2. Relate each one to its corresponding earlier or later crisis in life as seen in the book.
3. Give an example from the experience of one of the group members of each of the aspects.
4. Define the word "Moratorium" as it is used by the author and give an example as in number 3.

I am back playing "Nancy Nurse", visiting groups, pulling back from them and observing how they are doing. When the period is over, if there has been confusion, maybe they will bone up on what they didn't understand for the next class meeting! For the next meeting will be more of the same.

So this week has been a group-project week. Somehow I want to describe the group that did, in my opinion, the best project. Pete Kane is twenty-five, has two children, and is the group humorist — only later do I find out that he is very widely read. Steve Francis, my serious ex-Special Services soldier with his battle scars, who has a gift for digesting the lively conversation of the group on paper. Rich Sharpe, who is younger, an intense young man who is competitive — he quit another group that wasn't working hard enough to suit him earlier in the semester. And Sue, who is very quiet, except when she disagrees with something — a discerning listener in her blue overalls, not as noisy as the others but not taking a back seat either. The work of their week has a clear, simply put grasp of the theory and concrete examples that smack of reality. They are proud of their work — they enjoy it too!

Fourth Week

Somehow last week's work was like being on a canoe trip. Two people in a canoe in the water have only a few feet between them. A pair of canoes on a river often don't have much space between them either. Decisions have to be made, cooperation is necessary. It's fun, if you work together, but it's demanding and often irritating. We've been on the river for a week. It's time to get out of the water, feel a different surface, get a little distance from one another.

We will spend this week and part of next week reading an autobiography: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou.

First Class. I give a short individual test and we're off talking about Maya's early life — a discussion involving the whole class as a unit. Maya is a black woman; her childhood involves living with three different units of an extended American Black family.

In the beginning the discussion is mostly by white students — dismay at a child's being shuttled back and forth between different relatives in widely separated parts of the country. Obviously her childhood is a disaster. Fifteen minutes into the discussion Tim Montgomery, a young black man from Detroit, almost plaintively asks, "Doesn't anybody see anything good in her early life?" Tim explains that his own life was not totally different. He didn't know his father until he was twenty. He lived
with a grandmother for a while, with different aunts and uncles at various times during his childhood — and doesn’t feel deprived at all. He was always at home — felt the basic trust and recognition Erikson feels is so necessary for a child. He wasn’t just a parcel being passed around. He was a person and his scattered family knew who he was.

Somehow the class gets firing back and forth at Tim. He explains. They question . . . best of all, I’m not saying much. That’s hard on me, but good for the class. I talk too much anyhow. Slowly the conversation dies down. The four Blacks in class become silent. The rest of us are a little embarrassed, as I see it. Just before the period is over Ron Karlis explodes, “We haven’t gotten this thing off the ground. How come all you guys are afraid to talk?” He’s disgusted and angry.

The class drifts off, but Ron stays. Jeff Patton stays too, a thoughtful, impish black man — and a few others. I hang around and a spirited rap session runs for a half hour: differences between blacks and whites. That was fun! I wonder what other class they missed. I didn’t get to lunch, but it was worth it.

Second Class. More of Maya. A Black girl is raped when she is eight years old in St. Louis, Missouri. She is sent South by her family to live in a small town in Arkansas. It is there in the protective cocoon of a close black community to recover from the trauma of rape. Her small community understands pain; it is a part of their lives. In a one room school she begins to live again as a precocious student. Kids just don’t survive if they can’t make something work — the healing power of learning. I recall my years working with illiterate boys in a State Industrial School in Topeka, Kansas. Case history after case history revealed to me the terror and desperation born of being in primary school unable to read. One of the most effective therapists in that school was a well trained teacher of remedial reading.

In class we talked about primary school teachers. How well those college kids remember the one teacher who helped them read or learn basic Math skills, who cared enough to help them if they weren’t doing well. This is Erikson’s fourth stage: industry versus inferiority.

I find myself wondering why those memories are so vivid of the helpful teacher. My students are at Erikson’s Identity stage, most of them, when once again a sense of apprenticeship is often a glue that holds them together. I know they need the healing of being able to make something work here in college just as much as they did in grade school. That need revives a host of memories. The whole period went by discussing and remembering.

Sixth Week

First Class. They have finished the autobiography. In groups we take Maya through the eight stages of life, from cradle to grave — some of it is in the book, much of her earliest life they must imagine, as well as her later life, for the book ends when she is sixteen years old. The groups find it hard to see how there can be consecutive periods in an individual’s life with a crisis that is peculiar to each. The novel lends credence to the theory. Perhaps they are beginning to see.

Then we go through all the crises of Identity — the years of adolescence and young adulthood, seeking examples in Maya’s life. We are closer to
home now. Her impatience and sense of betrayal at any delay, her self-consciousness, her fighting the role of the traditional black, her confusion as to whether or not she was a lesbian, her need of encouragement not to be a blind follower of traditional black behavior, her cause — to be black and to be somebody and its accompanying sense of mission — they are all crowded so close together, so important and critical for later years.

What do I hope for? A slight opening on the part of white students into one black woman’s life, but much more than this. Maya’s story is in a sense their own story. Her confusion their confusion. Her hope their hope. Maya Angelou is primarily a human being — and so are they.

**Seventh Week**

**First Class.** Back to our rhythm of out of the canoe and onto the less confining bank. We take Erikson’s chapter on youth. It is an encouraging but confusing chapter. I teach the hell out of it. A lot has been pent up in me too after a week of low profile.

And so I characterize contemporary youth as shiftless and shifty. A feisty little Irish American girl erupts at being called shifty — she’s tired of being put down when she has worked so hard trying to find herself. I bite my tongue, let her finish. She had described so well what Erikson has observed: seemingly shiftless young people are often in search of something or someone worthy of trust. It is hard search; one must begin over, and over, and over. My short female has taught well what I was going to teach.

And so I shift. Youth’s need to be a special kind, to be unique, the counter-cultures of varying kinds. Such lovely goals, but so close to the intolerant arrogance of a master race, or as Erikson calls it, a “pseudo-species”. Super races are destructive; for they have no use for lesser species of human beings. I warn them.

The fear of determinism — how well my students know they are headed for a well programmed future in a technological society. They want to take their time before commitment — and so they should. Their reticence about making commitments of a lasting nature comes out in class. I agree — yes, wait . . . but don’t forget that whatever lasting choice you eventually DO make will indeed be made of the stuff of your past. You can’t change your past, I tell them, you can only work with it. I am accused of preaching. That’s fun for I can blow up with not wholly feigned anger and ask them what the hell do they expect from a teacher who spent twenty years studying and practicing the art of being a preacher. I can’t leave my past behind any more than they can, damn it! I can only work with it.

There is no more in this long class lecture, this is enough for flavor.

The second part of the period is spent in groups. I give each group an overhead transparency sheet and three different colored felt pens. Their task — to define search for something worthy of fidelity and to draw a symbol of what this means. Each group will have the chance to flash their transparency and explain to the others what it means.

**Second Class.** Womanhood and inner space.

Well, I knew this one was going to be a crunch. The reason? It’s two-fold. My own history from the time I was a little boy has been one of causes. I won’t go into detail, but there was an identity crisis in my life too. It was slowly and irrevocably solved by my joining the Jesuit Order long ago and finding my place in that organization by being a teacher-
preacher-priest. Just because I am not formally affiliated with the Society of Jesus anymore, doesn't mean that bent for taking up social causes in the classroom has left me. Erikson would chuckle, no doubt, that I am the third generation of four generations of Catholic American born priests as well as a descendant of some pretty pious Congregationalist New England folks.

To some extent perhaps that's why I find my most interesting students to be female and/or Black. Many of my girls, many of the small number of Black students who find their way into my classes are bent on finding a new identity. They are serious, often confused, but their struggle has a quality that speaks to me.

Erikson's chapter on womanhood is not popular with my female students, many of them, who are involved in the liberation of females in general, themselves in particular. If I understand correctly, it is because one of the cardinal tenets of what they call "the movement" is that women differ from men mainly for cultural reasons. Erikson's insistence that anatomy, in this case the female anatomy, is a major factor in one's identity, my girls flatly deny. It is true that Erikson uses his "anatomy is destiny" theory as a call for women to take their place with males in the public arena as equals. He feels the ground plan of a woman's anatomy gives her a certain inner quality, a concern with inner productivity. He sees our world as desperately needing inner productivity rather than outer exploitation — the male syndrome of industrial production for its own sake, outer exploitation, war, exploitation of nature. The old calypso tune, "Man smart, woman smarter" is his theme... based on the ground plan of anatomy.

I am content to run a rather sloppy class juxtaposing Erikson with current thinkers who take issue with him. Often it is lively, because there are such strong feelings. We carry on with numerous digressions for an hour.

Somewhere, in an off moment, a young man with a frown on his face, hesitantly raises a hand. We are approaching the end of the year, he notes. We do not have an examination but a paper or project, but the handout I gave them at the beginning of the year said that something called an "interface paper" would be due a week before the semester ends. It's getting to be close to that time. Would I explain it?

My explanation and rationale went something like this. We have done a lot of reading in this course. I am not so much concerned that you master all of the reading in such a way as to be able to render it up, like the coin of tribute, at the end of the semester. My hope is that somewhere in this course something has intrigued or troubled you as a student. I am not referring to peripheral things, but rather to something central in the thought of the two main thinkers we have taken — Viktor Frankl (the earliest portion of the course not dealt with in these notes) and Erik Erikson. What I am looking for is a careful second look on your part at that thing that intrigued or troubled you, a careful analysis of it in your own language. That would be a book report, but I want more than a book report. I want you to bring your own experience directly to bear on that idea or series of ideas. I want you to recall, if you can, just why and how that idea touched your experience of life. A simple recalling of your experience can be called a journal. This is a journal of a particular sort. It is a journal of how that book affected you, what it reminded you of in your life, how it spoke to you. I do not want outside references and
footnotes. I want you to tackle that idea, the same way a football player tackles another football player holding the ball. I want a collision. A possible title might be, "How I collided with Identity".

I ask myself why I want this, it is simply because I see little use in knowing something that doesn’t somehow speak to my own experience. Three years of working with interface has led me to conclude that the wasted energy of getting somebody else to do one's term paper seldom occurs here. My students really don’t cotton to the dorm term paper written by putting down on paper how they feel about something. By and large one’s feelings tend to be sacred.

In passing I note that the written medium for interface is most usual, but that some students may be more at home with another medium. I have received water color sketches of Erikson’s eight stages, I have had students of dance work them into dance form. They have appeared in poetry, sculpture and photographs. I ask only that if they decide on a medium other than prose, that they check it out with me beforehand. In point of fact my most memorable interfaces have come in another form than the standard six typewritten pages. If there is a way to measure whether or not the goals of my course have been met, I find this kind of interface a most valuable tool, for it tells me not only whether or not my students have been able to understand what we have discussed, symbolized, and read. I could do that, very likely with a standardized test. My goals include whether and how they were moved by that understanding.

Eighth Week

First Class. Once a semester I do it — a movie. This one is The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pitman. It is a long and painful film of development. A child who is a slave travels through time, living the history of her part of Southern United States, culminating as a hundred and ten year old civil rights activist in the sixties. The tension, the pain, the search for fidelity — something or someone to be true to. I hope it sums up or dramatizes much of what we have been about this semester.

As the film opens I stand outside the theater and pick up the interface papers and sundry objects — everything from third rate collages to sculptures, to developmental poems. I have four days to correct and scrutinize about a hundred of them. They are more fun to work with than a hundred examinations, that much at least.

Second Class. Erikson’s last chapter focussing on race and the wider identity. I pull out all the stops in the old mouth organ and teach, old fashioned style, like crazy.

The word identity is prominent in contemporary Black literature, usually an agonizing negative identity attempting to find itself in a compact majority that simply does not see its name, to paraphrase James Baldwin. The history of the American black people strikes me as being deeply a dark glass through which all young adults can see themselves — nameless, faceless, shiftless — searching, searching, searching.

I talk of the dilemma of integration, which so often means absorption or submission. The segregated campus here at Western Michigan University is not by chance, nor do most of us who are white have much understanding of it. And yet my grandfather’s family did the same thing. They were immigrants, finding a place in another country — again I think of the title of a book by Baldwin. They were forging a new identity. Not surprising that they stuck together in Church, marriage, school, and play — just to
survive! Black people have been in my country longer than most of my own Catholic people, but they have been denied a positive identity. They stick together here at school just as my forebears did. Why should we expect them to be like us, who have robbed them of much of what is positive in their identity?

I lecture, knowingly talking to white students, of what a mind blower it must be to discover the joy of being black. A black student throws in what a real mind blower it was for him to discover a positive kind of black consciousness here at Western, a real revolution in consciousness. I talk in terms of this of Erikson’s hope that neither Blacks nor Whites will remain racists, for there is, in the last analysis, but one race. His fear, repeatedly expressed, of a super race, white or black. One must discover the human race in one’s identity just as importantly as one discovers the beauty of being black.

Ninth Week

A hundred interfaces have each a short paragraph from me now and a grade. I have averaged those grades into those daily quizzes, counting the interfaces a third of the mark. So many students I knew only vaguely before have surfaced as real people in those interfaces. A feeling of frustration wells up in me, for as things are coming to a close I feel a closeness to many of those people, new, for the first time.

The walk to class with stacks of papers and odd shaped packages containing posters, sculptures. There is a single slip of paper containing the initials of each student in alphabetical order with the final grade recorded next to each student’s initials.

Most of them are there in the classroom when I get there, so the paper with the final grades is passed around the room while I call out the names on the projects from each one to pick up his or her interface. It is a time of intensity.

Now we form a circle of chairs, putting me in the middle, and I ask each student to give me a letter grade for the course, out loud, with a short verbal editorial if they choose to make one. I want to do this; somehow it seems fair that I get the same form of grade the university requires me to give them. Slowly, around the circle each student speaks. It is purging but uncomfortable, but a good time to speak, for I have given them all the data I can — the emotions are as real now as they ever will be. Some rake me over the coals for not explaining the matter enough. Others say it was too difficult. Still others found real personal help. My grades vary from A to D.

The circle is completed. Most of them leave. Perhaps ten stay — some close to tears, some waiting to say goodbye. Again we sit in a circle. I explain that we will each initially give a sentence beginning with the words “I think.” After all have said this, we will go round again beginning with “I see.” After all have filled that sentence we will begin with “I feel.” Then, looking directly at someone in the group, “I think you feel.” The last sentence begins, “I want to tell you.”

It is a progression game, increasing in intensity with each round. By the time we are finished several of my good people are in tears, but the reasons for their stay after the others were gone is apparent — gratefulness or resentment for a grade or some aspect of the course. I remember Steve telling one of the girls who had worked very hard on a series of pictures
which I judged not to show Erikson’s theory, how ten years ago he had flunked out of school. Pete tells her not to pay too much attention to teachers. If she is proud of her work, that’s enough.

One grade is a simple error on my part. I change it. The others remain the same. At least I have confronted them all face to face.

I feel a little beat up. My grades were sometimes as difficult to take as theirs were. Anita said, “Frank, you’re a good guy, but I didn’t get anything out of the course.” It has been blunt, but I like that. I know I’m a good teacher, but it’s hard not to be super, because, always I want to be better — and to be liked too.

And so they are gone. Most of them I will not see again. Will I ever hear of a lyric poet named Sharon White or a talented cartoonist named Jeff Patton? I hope so.