IV. LEADERSHIP

MARVIN DIOGENES Interview

WELCOMED: Tell us about your background and trajectory from Stanford undergrad to leadership of the Program in Writing and Rhetoric.

Marvin Diogenes: I came to Stanford as a first-generation college student in 1973, living in Larkin my first year, the now-demolished Manzanita Trailer Park at the corner of Escondido and Campus Drive as a sophomore, and then in Loro in FloMo as an RA after that. I have stories about all of those years, for another time. Before Stanford, I grew up with my parents and two older sisters in Oak Park, Michigan, just outside Detroit. Yes, I still follow the Tigers, Lions, Pistons, and Red Wings.

My parents, born in Poland in 1914 (Dad) and 1925 (Mom), both survived years in concentration camps during World War II. They lost most of their families, including both sets of my grandparents and many of my aunts and uncles on both sides. My father lost his first wife and first child, a daughter.

Growing up, I gradually learned some bits and pieces of the family history, often by overhearing things my parents said to each other or from conversations they had with visiting friends who were also immigrants. While my parents spoke Yiddish and sometimes Polish to each other, Polish when they wanted to be sure we would not understand them, they almost always spoke English to me and my sisters. None of us speaks Yiddish, though we understand a few words. I remember attending Holocaust memorial gatherings in April of some years, not yet old enough to understand the historical context, the tears of the survivors, or the agonized passion of the speakers.

My parents had me attend “Hebrew School” two afternoons a week after public school and on Sunday mornings. We did not learn Hebrew but focused on Jewish ethical matters and some Jewish history. I attended Shabbos services with my father throughout my childhood. I learned to read Hebrew but not to speak or understand it. After services, I sat at the kitchen table with my father studying *Pirkei Avot* (*Wisdom of the Fathers*) at the designated time of year, as he had with his father. My parents chose to emphasize their positive memories of their Jewish upbringings, mostly through family holiday celebrations and father-son Torah study, the second of which I believe had much to do with my affinity for close reading and interpretation once I reached those formative academic experiences in English classes at Oak Park High.

WELCOMED: When you think back on studying *Pirkei Avot* with your father, what is one teaching or interpretive habit that has stayed with you?

Marvin Diogenes: One lasting understanding from those kitchen-table conversations with my father has to do with the benefits of returning to the same text to read again, discuss again, and interpret again. That sense of ongoing, endless engagement with others about texts provides the foundation for Talmud study generally, and the practice carried over for me to the reading of literary texts and the viewing of television shows and movies. I like to say that "you can't read the same text twice," because we change over time, and the changed you or me reading the text results in our understanding of the text changing, which I prefer to call the text changing.

A related lesson has to do with not thinking of reading as reading for information or "the facts," what I call "extractive" reading, but rather thinking of reading as an experience of or journey toward making meaning and increasing understanding. After we read a passage aloud, my father asked me questions. I assume now that he imitated his father asking him questions about the same text. I did my best to explain what the passage meant. In those days I probably wanted to get the answer right. Now I think less about right answers and more about answers as part of a process of working toward greater understanding, with no final answer available, because next year we will talk about the text again, making it new.

As a young teacher, I had to remind myself constantly over a period of years that classroom discussions and the essays that students wrote should not aim to end a discussion or conversation but to deepen everyone's engagement and inspire further discussion and writing. I still have to remind myself of that.

I will add something here about what stays with me from my experience attending Shabbos services: I was always more interested in the rabbi's sermon than in the liturgy. The liturgy seemed to me repetitive and even dull. The sermons focused on how the rabbi interpreted the meaning of a Torah reading and shared that meaning with the congregation. To this day, I find the sermons what I value most about attending services, because I appreciate the rabbi entering the centuries-long conversation and making the Torah new.

WELCOMED: And how did these experiences shape your new life at Stanford?

Marvin Diogenes: Okay, let's talk about my undergraduate years. How did I carry these childhood experiences to Stanford in terms of my inner life as I inched toward adulthood and my academic life as I completed an undergraduate degree in English? To address the "easier" question first, my Stanford-English-major self developed naturally from my Oak-Park-High-English-classes self with a dash of my Talmud-scholar-lite experiences in

Hebrew School, Shabbat and High Holiday services, and my time with my father at the kitchen table.

The more difficult question of personal development connects to leaving the cultural familiarity of Oak Park, where the public schools closed for the Jewish High Holidays, for the bracingly diverse culture of Stanford, as well as coming to greater understanding of how that diversity translated into lived experience. For example, in Oak Park I had not heard, much less been the target of, anti-Semitic slurs. One of the Larkin dorm residents used such a slur in casual conversation with another resident, not directed at me or at another Jewish student but within earshot. The slur taught me something about colloquial or idiomatic anti-Semitism, a set of words based in stereotypes and biases that weave into the fabric of everyday life. I still can recall, more than fifty years later, the vertigo I felt, a mix of confusion, anger, and powerlessness in the face of such offhand, nothing-to-see-here derogation of a religion and a people.

WELCOMED: After that moment, was there a Stanford place, community, or practice that grounded you again and made you feel like you belonged?

Marvin Diogenes: Alongside that moment, many positive moments happened during my first year. I expect Stanford parallels many peer universities in how residential life creates lifelong friendships. When I served as a Resident Fellow in West Lagunita from 2006 to 2012, I told the frosh every year at the first house meeting that some of the dormmates sitting with them on the couches or the floor of the lounge would be their friends for the rest of their lives. I felt comfortable saying that because it was true for me.

I am still connected to some of the 1973 Larkin residents. There is even a Larkin 1973 email list, with one of the RAs posting links to songs that he and a partner write and record. When I did not go back to Michigan for Thanksgiving or winter break that first year, one of my dormmates invited me to her home for dinner. Her father worked for the university, and she had grown up in a house on campus. Her entire family helped me feel I was not a stranger in a strange land. When she visited for her fiftieth high school reunion a few years ago, we had several meals together, talking about our time in Larkin and marveling that we were still connected fifty years later. Stanford can do that.

WELCOMED: What courses shaped your experience at Stanford?

Marvin Diogenes: Aside from the English courses central to my major and a couple of courses in film history that provided the foundation for a lifelong interest in movies, I enrolled in a course titled *The History of Anti-Semitism*, taught by Professor Gavin Langmuir. That class threw me into something of a crisis psychologically and emotionally. Walking around campus, I felt the

pastoral surroundings lose substance, becoming a kind of mirage while what I learned from Professor Langmuir's lectures and the course readings he assigned gathered weight in my inner movie. I needed years to process what I learned before I could write about it in some of the short stories I wrote for my MFA manuscript in Arizona. Even then, I did not write directly about the Holocaust but rather about the survivors and their children, drawing on both personal experience and academic coursework.

WELCOMED: How did your Stanford experiences find their way into your creative work?

Marvin Diogenes: When I started writing the stories that became part of my MFA short fiction manuscript at Arizona, I realized that I could categorize the stories into two major types, what I call my "Jewish stories" and what I call my "Stanford stories." This suggests that I somehow separate my Jewish identity from my Stanford identity, but I do not think the reality is as simple as that.

I will offer that the Jewish stories draw on my childhood, my family life, and the experience of living in Oak Park with many Jewish friends and neighbors. Oak Park was not exclusively Jewish. When my father and I walked to Young Israel of Oak Woods for Shabbos services, we passed Our Lady of Fatima on the way, and there were other synagogues and churches in the small town as well. Those stories also draw on Professor Langmuir's course for historical context about the Jewish experience.

The stories I think of as Stanford stories sometimes directly develop characters and plots out of people I met and things that happened during my undergrad years. That holiday dinner at my Larkin friend's house made its way into a story, as did fictional versions of the rest of her family. Other stories featured other people and situations I encountered. The stories fit into the two categories because the Stanford experience dramatically expanded, one might say exploded, my Oak Park experience, introducing me to a more diverse array of cultural traditions and ways of being in the world. I could even say something about socioeconomic class here, as I encountered a number of wealthy, powerful, and politically connected people at Stanford far beyond my Oak Park experience. That is not unusual for Stanford students, I expect.

I do not want any of this to lead to the conclusion that I had to maintain a split self to get through Stanford. At the same time, I would agree that to some extent I still think of myself as fundamentally an Oak Park guy, with my Stanford self and later selves beyond layered onto that Oak Park core.

Let me describe a highlight of my Larkin year in relation to this point. My frosh RA, Peter, put together a troupe called The Larkin Players to put on a dorm play in the Toyon lounge in March

1974, an adaptation of J.D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, a short story and novella from the 1950s published together in book form. I had always wanted to act but had not worked up the nerve in high school. I auditioned, and Peter cast me in the role of Zooey.

I spent all of winter quarter memorizing Zooey's long monologues, delivered first to his mother Bessie in the second act and then to his sister Franny in the third and final act, which stretched nearly to an hour, with Zooey talking most of the time. I took Introduction to Acting that quarter as well, but what I learned in that course did not really give me much specific guidance for how to pull off that leading role. I had no choice but to dive in, sink or swim, a useful metaphor for any new experience.

What matters in this context is that Zooey had a Jewish father and an Irish Catholic mother, two former vaudevillians who married and raised seven children together in the ramshackle New York City apartment where the play takes place, Zooey and Franny the second youngest and youngest of the brood. The older brothers Seymour and Buddy taught the younger siblings about Buddhism, so Zooey ranted his way through life, and the play, as a conduit for Jewish, Irish Catholic, and Buddhist teachings to varying degrees. Playing this character had me talking about things I knew little about, particularly Buddhist practices.

The play ends with a long soliloquy from Zooey that ends with an evocation of Jesus as the audience Franny and Zooey must perform for. They are both actors by profession, both experiencing a crisis of faith and identity as they try to figure out how to live. Why does this matter? Well, acting the role required me to stretch into religious traditions far from my Oak Park self, to get the audience to accept the acting me as Zooey, a complex, conflicted character born of diverse systems of belief. I had to become many selves and ultimately an amalgam of selves. Stanford can do that to you too.

WELCOMED: Where have you seen strong examples of faith, tradition, or community enter students' writing?

Marvin Diogenes: Before I returned to Stanford in 2000 to work in what became PWR, the program was called Writing and Critical Thinking for about nine years before the name change to the Program in Writing and Rhetoric in September 2003, one key lesson I learned as a teacher focused on valuing the language experiences and home rhetorics that undergraduates bring with them to Stanford while striving to design a writing curriculum that welcomes those experiences and rhetorical traditions, inviting students to bring them into the campus community both in their academic writing and in their contributions to campus culture.

While still at Arizona, two Composition Program colleagues and I put together an anthology for writing classes called *Living Languages*. The readings we included, along with the essay introductions, study questions, and writing activities we wrote for each of the readings, highlighted for students how their home culture, family history, and community connections belonged in the university setting and could help them develop their academic projects and scholarly identities. In other words, they did not have to leave parts of themselves behind when they entered the university.

I have encountered many students over the span of my career who bring themselves fully to their research and writing, lifting the inquiry and insight beyond the constraints of a school assignment. This transformative experience begins with some basic questions: What matters to the writer? How does the writer want to engage with the world and potentially change the world? What is at stake for the writer and for the reader, and how does that awareness create the opportunity to build a shared space that changes the writer's and reader's understanding of the world?

Now, forty-five years after I taught my first writing class at Arizona, I still see the same challenges in play for students entering the university, specifically the challenge of bringing one's whole self to college writing rather than following a path of least resistance by writing with part of oneself, leaving out lived experience and home cultural language traditions because one believes, and/or fears, that they do not belong in the university. I have come to believe that each individual student has the ability, and perhaps the responsibility, to add their distinctive language to the university, enriching and expanding the community.

I further believe that research and writing motivated and informed by individual experience and language has more power than rote academic writing restrained by, made mechanical and less human by, anxiety about correctness and getting the surface features right. Yes, those components do matter, but they should serve rather than replace human connection and communication through language.

WELCOMED: What helps students translate their lived experiences into evidence-based arguments?

Marvin Diogenes: Let's talk about narrative as a strategy for doing this. While classical rhetoric, particularly for Aristotle, focused on persuasion, twentieth-century scholar Kenneth Burke asserted that modern rhetoric focused on identification, the need to build connections between speaker and audience, often including values and beliefs, as necessary to persuasion.

With that in mind, I believe that every argument is also a narrative, with writers deciding how explicit to make the narrative. I think that much writing a reader judges as “boring” has suppressed all the narrative energy that holds a reader’s attention. I want all writers to reconsider how they think about narrative’s role in the essay, whether we can stretch the boundaries and bring narrative elements out into the open to sustain the reader’s engagement and to emphasize that the issues we write about and the arguments we put forward have human consequences. Those elements engage readers in ways that facts, dates, and logical arguments located some distance from lived experience cannot, ultimately activating their capacity for identification, empathy, and understanding.

Certainly a dimension of this has to do with how to integrate personal experience and cultural inheritance into academic writing. We can tell our own stories. We can also remember that the issues we write about directly affect human beings, and we can commit to telling their stories or making space for their testimony in our writing.

WELCOMED: What do you hope a student learns?

Marvin Diogenes: First, value the process of writing, accepting that we write toward understanding. The deeper the engagement with the writing process, the higher the likelihood that we learn from writing. In addition, a writing process that generates understanding for the writer also might increase the chances that the reader will learn from what we write. Writer and reader thus become a small learning community.

Second, believe in your agency and power in the realm of language. Accept and revel in the responsibility that comes with using language to foster connection and community as well as develop one’s own awareness of complexity in human character and human interactions.

Extending that point, learn that academic writing succeeds when writers bring all of themselves to the exploration of ideas and crafting of language, not shutting parts of themselves out of the process. As I have shared with my colleagues in PWR, we can think of PWR as the Program in World-Building and Relationship, as writing does not merely report on the world but renews and creates the world through developing connections between texts and ideas and between writers and readers. Thus writing ultimately serves as an invitation, creating a world of words for readers to enter and learn from, just as the writer has learned from the process of writing.

Third, think less about the adjectives assigned to your writing and to you as a writer, labeling adjectives such as “bad” or “good,” whether coming from others or from yourself, and more about the nouns “writer” and “writing.” Focus on your growth as a writer and on developing greater facility and flexibility in making the choices a writer makes. Writing and language more

generally accompany us through our lives, from personal interactions to academic and professional contexts. So why not become friends with that constant companion?