

## Education of a Polymath

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I've had the opportunity in life to get a great education. I had some good teachers along the way. Professors, well, not so well. I graduated 13<sup>th</sup> in my High School Class. I was the Valedictorian in Grade 9 at St Peter's Catholic School in the north End of Saint John, but the award was given to a student who was neighbours with the principal, AS. He said our Shop grade should not count because we had to go to a different school which had the facilities for shop. The only way I found out that I was the true valedictorian was from the guy who came second. His shop grade did not count either. The prizes were \$1000 for first place; and \$500 for second place. I finished 3<sup>rd</sup> and got nothing. I was also the homecoming King. I remember that there was an awful mix of socioeconomic backgrounds in the students. I was in the middle or upper middle. The sons and daughter of Doctors and Lawyers felt like they should not have had to associate with those from the North End. There were lots of drugs around; both in the rich and poor kids. There were rapes or gang bangs of the girls in the woods in Milledgeville. An Indian brought a gun into school. BS, son of the principal, despised me simply because I did well in school. I played organized hockey. He hated me because I had nice equipment. I recall that SC, in Grade 8, ratted on me after I told him I didn't have my English homework done. My father drove him to hockey every time. The teacher said I dropped from first to second in English in grade 8. There were two classes of each grade.

In high school, I enrolled in St Malachy's High Memorial High School for grades 10-12. I was a hockey beginning. I put my name in for Junior Achievement. By the luck of the draw, I and SD did not get drawn out of the whole class. We probably were the most likely entrepreneurs. I tried out for the high school hockey team. I made it to the last cut when the two of us in grade 10, PW and I were both

cut. There was only one person in grade 10 who made the team. That was MH. He went on to be the high scoring players in the league in Grade 12. PW's father was an NHL scout. He said both PW and I should have made the team because a team in grade 12 could have been built around us. That hockey team went on to win the High School Coca-Cola tournament -the best High school hockey team in Eastern Canada including Quebec.

It was a rocky beginning at St Malachy's. I enrolled in all enriched. I found that there was too much homework, so I dropped to only enriched English and Math. I had 5 excellent teachers at St Malachy's. It was the place where I received the best education. I had Dr Owen Dunn, a PhD in Chemistry. He was a superb Chemistry teacher. I failed grade 10 chemistry. The teachers were a first-year woman teacher. Out of the six courses I had to repeat in my education, four were taught by first year female teachers. So they gave me a "C" in Chemistry anyway, and I was off to grade 11 Chemistry with Dr Dunn. Even though half the class were in grade 12, I got the highest mark in the class. I only wish I had taken up work in the lab at the invitation of Dr. Dunn.

For enriched Math, I had Mr. Paul Assaff for three years. He was simply the best teacher I ever had. His style was to teach from the black board for 15 minutes, then assign homework with him available for questions. Out of 132 graduates in my year, only about 12 of us were permitted to take enriched Math. I recall him saying at the end of grade 12 that any of us could have been the Valedictorian. AL, valedictorian in grade 9, went on to become valedictorian in grade 12. He received a \$10,000 scholarship from the Provincial University. I was told by Mr. Horgan that I did not receive a scholarship because I did not participate in the after-school activities. I made the cut for the baseball team

but felt I could not hit. I told Mr. Court that I would be an automatic out at the plate. So, I did not join the team. I tried; they would not let me. Incidentally, I found out on graduation night that Mr. Comeau, English teacher, put two students in charge of deciding who would get what scholarship. LR and CA, my cousin, gave me no scholarship. I had High Honours; sat in the front row on graduation night. Mr. Horgan found a \$750 scholarship at St FX, which did not have a full engineering program.

I had always wanted to be an Architect. I was good at everything, but especially drawing and painting, and later photography. But I feared public speaking. Mr. Comeau tried to break my fear of public speaking by getting me to read every day in Enriched English. He was a good man. I had expressed an interest in politics. The Federal Government had a computer program that was supposed to tell us what to do with our careers. I was scheduled to be a dry wall layer. Imagine! I called it quits on guidance. I had a girl friend whom I took to the prom. Me an MA, Dr A's son, ran the roads as young men do.

I had a grade 12 physics teacher, Mr. JB. He said one day that he could feel my eyes on him. He laid into me saying things like, "What kind of name is" Cusack". I responded Irish. He said I was probably born with half a pint of liquor in me. He said my head was too big for my body and that I should switch heads with PF. And L. the midget, we do not know what happened to her. He asked me what my parents did. I responded proudly that they owned and operated a flower shop. JB says AL's father was paying for me to go to school. Andy and I were the only two who wrote the University of Waterloo Physics test. Mr JB said, Andy got questions right but Paul got the highest score. The test instructed that points would be taken off for incorrect answers. My strategy, which worked, was just to answer the questions that I knew were right, no guessing. Andy went on to get the Physics prize on graduation night. Other good teachers I had at St Mac's were my Bill Coffee, History teacher Terry Comeau, Enriched English teacher, and Mr. Sheehan, French teacher. I could almost speak French when I was done his class. I took grade 11 French from Mr. George Jenkins. He would start at the far side of the classroom and

proceed to ask a French question. He went up and down the rows until he came to me. I was the only one who could answer the question in French. It happened twice. On the third approach, I did not quite get the right answer. The hockey team dropped to the bottom by grade 12. I tried out in Grade 11 and grade 12, but never made the team. I do not know how you can be the last cut in grade 10, and not make the team in grade 11 or 12 after most of the team graduated. Dr LS simply did not want me on the team. Mr. Jenkins said that "What you do here (high school) is what you'll do when you get out." He was right.

Off to university.

So, I received no scholarship so I decided, naively, with a friend RC that we would go to the number one ranked engineering school in Canada and number 2 in the world: The University of Waterloo. That university was an 18-hour drive away in Ontario. I did not visit the place before I signed up. Ontario at the time had grade 13. RC and I only had grade 12. Mr. Assaff compared Math in Ontario and math in New Brunswick and found that we covered the same material, except Calculus. Students from CEGEP in Quebec and grade 14. RC and I were unprepared for what came next. We were told to enrol in Mt Allison University and take Calculus over the summer by distance. That was a flop, but we were admitted to Waterloo anyway. Waterloo was a disaster for both RC and I. We did not flunk out, but we finished 5<sup>th</sup> of 5 ranks. RC had said if we both did not get into residence, we would live off campus together. He got in and I did not. He reneged. I lived too far from the university- a place I picked out over the phone. I had no car. We simply were not adequately prepared to meet the riggers of university. Both of us decided to take our Waterloo work term at the first January point. We were told to get calculus. We both enrolled at UNB Saint John Campus. I got straight A's in full year courses despite being there for only half the year.

My plan was to take Aeronautical Engineering. They told me to enroll in Mechanical Engineering. I did. But I switched to Electrical Engineering. There was more math. I was good at Math. I had passed the

linear Algebra at Waterloo. RC did not He passed Chemistry. I did not.

So, at UNBSJ, there was a girl who was crazy over me for some reason. When I did not go out with her, she went berserk. Her name was Pam. She apparently started dating a Muslim fellow, Kash. He thought I was trying to steal his potential girlfriend, so he started to apply Sharia Law to me. His family did not want him to go out with a non-Muslim. He was my lab partner in Electrical Engineering. He would tape our conversations. He offered me a Coke before the final exam in the most important course in EE. I got a zero in it. He had put some chemical in the Coke. That would not allow my brain to work. I subsequently dropped out of Electrical Engineering. I returned to my roots of Architecture and thought I would take Structural Engineering. I got a D in the main course in Civil Engineering too from Ralph Francis. It was the final hurdle in the weeder courses. For every 10 students who start Engineering, only 1 finish. A D is as good as an F because you need at least a C to keep going. Second time around, with a lot of strenuous work, I got an A-. I would not say I have any good professors at UNB Fredericton. Dr John Dawe taught me four courses in Steel, Concrete, Masonry, and Wood. He was the best professor I had had. Dr Lloyd Waugh was good in Project Management. He was very likeable. By the end of the program, I was exhausted. I took 208 credit hours. For comparison, an Arts degree is 110 CH; A Business Degree is 120CR. Engineering is normally 180 CH. To pass engineering in 4 years, you must take 7 & 7; 8 & 8; 8 & 8; and 7 & 7 courses per term. A regular load is 5 courses per term. Only two people in the history of Canada's oldest Engineering School passed in 4 years. I passed Soil mechanics on the first try. A friend who is now the President of an large engineering consulting company failed it. I got a B. I also had to repeat Material Science, a chemical engineering course. The first professor was English. I just could not anything out of his lectures.

The university provided employment opportunities on campus. I landed a job in Construction management in Ontario. I asked for \$30 k per year and was taken up on it. Literally half the class did not get a job. It was the beginning of a slump in the

economy that lasted until now, 2021. There are jobs galore nowadays. Civil Engineers are like the canary in the cave. They are the first to go in a downturn in the economy. I worked for a company that was going down the tubes when I started with them. There were no raises despite gaining competence. I recall my boss, a 30-year-old Mechanical Engineer and a Construction guy, said that there was no difference between someone without a degree and someone with a degree. I was forced to work with brutes. One of them poisoned me at the company party with a chemical that makes you sterile. Can you believe it?

While I was at UNB Fredericton, I was accused of being a rapist. We did not even have sex, so I do not know how that is possible. They put the story on the front page of the student newspaper at the neighbouring university, St Thomas University. They labelled me as a rapist. Mike Comeau, my friend from St Peter's school, caught me and got me to agree that they would print a retraction if I agreed not to sue. I never got the swing of things socially at UNB. I was not invited to any socials or dances etc. UNB is ranked in the tip 3.4% of universities worldwide with a student population of over 10,000 students worldwide. They have a Law School, Engineering, Medicine, Science, Nursing etc. They are a comprehensive university. There were no crowds at the varsity football or hockey games.

While in Ontario, I took a Photography course from St Lawrence College- a community college. I really enjoyed it. We would sit in a darkened classroom and watch slides of our past weeks class assignments. While in Toronto, I had also enrolled in a drawing course that I did not continue. I was not interested in it after the first class. I did complete a Heritage Architecture course from Ryerson University in Downtown Toronto. It was enjoyable. The Professors may have been a creative genius. He was remarkably interesting to learn from. I worked as a project manager in the ICI Building Construction Industry, but always had an eye of Architecture.

Next, I embarked on the study of Business. I enrolled in three distance programs-none of which worked out. I studied MBA Finance and Economics from Harriot -Watt in Scotland; Master of Financial

Economics from the London School of Economics; and Independent study of the Chartered Financial Analyst. Despite having taken Accounting for Business students at UNB, I could not get the hang of it in higher level programs.

Despite not passing the programs, I learned enough about Economics to write popular academic research. It was not for a lack of trying that I failed at these programs. I was keenly interested in the material. A master's degree by distance was beyond my abilities.

I also undertook the study of Theology and Martyrology on my own. We have an excellent Catholic bookstore in the city. I estimate I read over 100 books on things Catholic. I said I got an education out of that store. The books were not cheap. They were imported from the USA mostly. They were expensive.

The final place I enrolled was the University of British Columbia Diploma in Urban Land Economics, (or real estate for short). I took 13 courses. I failed two -Real Property law and Mass Appraisal (Statistics). I know why I failed the Law. It was that I was reading Theology when I should have been reading Law. But the statics was another matter. It was statistics by computer. The tutor gave me a 28% on a paper worth 20% of one's grade. I had already had the diploma but was doing continuing education. I asked the president of UBC for intervention, but I received none. I took the Real Estate Development speciality. I tried to work at it. I failed to become an entrepreneur.

The lessons learned from formal education are useful. Information is power. I learned also that one must be adequately prepared to pass in a competitive program. I passed Engineering and got my professional licence, P. Eng. I passed UBC and got my diploma. I got invitations to study at the Ivey School of business in London Ontario that is Canada's #1 ranked MBA. I was invited to study at Northwestern Master of Science in Law -or Law for Engineers. The tuitions are staggering. It costs \$85,000 USD to study at Northwestern -ranked #9

for US Law Schools. I wrote the Graduate Record Exam in 1990 in case I was heading from Graduate school. I scored 1120 or the 67percentil for quantitative and 52 percentiles for verbal. Interesting that I am in the bottom third form quantitative for Engineers; but in the top third for Verbal for engineers.

I think good teachers at the High School level is important -probably the most important time in a student's life. We should invest heavily in High School education. I am not sure Distance Education has a great future, at least for me. I failed at least 6 courses in my life; more if you count exams, I never wrote. It is a truism that we learn more from our mistakes than we do from our successes. I have had my fair share of failures, especially when it comes to distance education. I am presently deciding what to take next, Law or more Real Estate. I am sick from the COVID-19 every three weeks. I may not be able to take anything. I continue to study every day on my own. Amazon provides the books. As a polymath, I've studied Math, Engineering; Photography; Economics; finance; Management; Real Estate; Architecture; Nursing; Anatomy; History, Psychology; Business, Chemistry. What next?

School is an artificial environment. You will only learn what you do. As an engineer, I was ill prepared for the job. I still needed to be trained despite 6 years in engineering school. The workplace is where we really learn. I think that should be acknowledged and apprenticeships should be made available. Also, career guidance was extremely poor in High School. University is expensive. In fact, it is too much money for the person who is an adolescent to spend. I was too immature to realize what was required of me in these programs. Distance Education seem to be happy to drop you if you do not pass. But they collect their money still. Distance Education is not for most people.