

Reflections on Lifelong Learning

by Elizabeth “Beth” Peterson
Associate Professor, Dept. of Nursing, Bethel University

Sharing some perspectives about lifelong learning seemed an easy-enough task when I was first asked to do this. However, what started out easy actually became quite a challenge that led to some self-discovery and a brief voyage around the world and back into history. At first I thought that I would just talk about my own experiences with learning. But when I thought about what I might say, recounting those experiences seemed quite uninteresting, and I’m sure that you would have felt the same way. I tried to think about lifelong learning in some different ways, and eventually, I was able to put together some thoughts about lifelong learning that I would like to share with you.

So the first challenge was figuring out how to approach the topic, but the second challenge was the term lifelong learning. I certainly didn’t have trouble with the learning part. I think I have been engaged in some type of formal education during every decade of my life, and I continue to be so now. The problem was with the word “lifelong.” At Bethel we talk a great deal about the goal of preparing students to be lifelong learners, but we also recognize that, at least for the traditional aged student, this goal is something

that, by definition, will happen in the future and when they get much older. Consequently, I began to conceptualize lifelong learning as something that happens in the future, when people have lived long lives. So, when I began to think about sharing my experiences with lifelong learning, the obvious question came to my mind, am I a lifelong learner? If I said “no,” then I could continue to delude myself with the notion that I haven’t lived long enough to qualify as a lifelong learner. However, if I said “yes,” then I would be forced to also acknowledge that I met the longevity test, that I have somehow reached that far and distant state where I have actually become a lifelong learner, that I’m old enough to be one. After a fair amount of thinking, I decided to embrace the notion that I, in fact, am a life long learner in spite of the reality that one can’t become a lifelong learner without a little bit of long life. However, maybe, becoming a lifelong learner is one of the trade-offs for also having to deal with some of the other not-so-pleasant things that come with long life. So with that, I came to my first conclusion about lifelong learning: it is something worth embracing.

After I worked through that long life dilemma, I was faced with another question. If I am, indeed, a lifelong learner, how in the world did that happen, how was I afflicted with this malady? That question was not nearly as difficult to answer. I place the blame for that squarely in the lap of

my family, and not just my immediate family, but my family for several generations back. The oral history that I know of my family goes back to my great-grandparents. They were all born and became adults in either Sweden or Norway. What they had in common is that they were peasants and pietists. As pietists, they were readers, the term used to describe the lay people who read, interpreted, and applied the Bible, the lay people who got themselves into trouble with the state church. Whether they belonged to the state church, the free Lutheran church, the Mission Friends, or the Baptists, all of them read the Bible. When they immigrated to the U.S., they continued to be peasants and pietists who read the Bible, and because of their interest in the Bible, they also read other things. I remember a story that my grandmother told me about her father. He brought his family to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and worked as a laborer on the railroad. He learned very little English, but he regularly read his Swedish Bible. He and his wife had become Christians through a renewal movement in Sweden. I suspect that, as apart of this movement, there was a concomitant interest in Biblical prophecy. I say this because they were from the same area and were contemporaries of Selma Lagerlöf, the Swedish author who wrote the novel *Jerusalem* that described the lives of several Swedish people who moved to Jerusalem, ostensibly to be ready for the Messiah's return. My great-

grandfather shared this same fascination with Jerusalem and avidly read, not only the Bible, but newspaper articles and prophecy books about Israel. My point is not to suggest that his perspective was either theologically or politically accurate, but rather that because he read, interpreted, and tried to apply the Bible, this peasant immigrant became interested in world politics. One of the pieces of advice that he gave his daughter, my grandmother was, “Be sure to follow what happens to the nation of Israel.” I thoroughly believe that his interest in what was then known as Palestine set the stage for creating a family that became learners for life, and I don’t doubt that I am living out his influence even today.

Another person who clearly impacted my becoming a lifelong learner was my grandmother. She grew up on a farm, of sorts, along the south shore of Lake Superior near Ashland and Bayfield. Although that is beautiful county, very little, if any, of the land around Lake Superior is farmland, so her immigrant family struggled to ek out a living off the land. She graduated from eighth grade, but had no hope of any further schooling. She married, moved to Duluth, and became the mother of three children. When my father wanted to go to Bethel Junior College and later to Wheaton, she took a job in a factory in order to help pay his tuition bills. But somewhere along the way, she saved enough money to take painting lessons, fulfilling one of her

lifelong desires. When we cleaned out her house after she moved to a nursing home, her bedroom was lined with bookshelves full of books and her walls were full of her oil paintings. I honestly don't know if she read all of those books, but I do know that she loved them. After her death, her paintings and her books remained as a memorial to her commitment to learn new things. But her learning didn't stop with painting and collecting books. There is a story about her in my family's oral history, too. When I was a small child, we went as a family to some event at UMD, possibly at the Tweed Art Gallery. While we were there, a young woman came up to my grandmother and started talking to her about books, assignments, and tests. My grandmother was obviously very uncomfortable and kept trying to move this woman and the conversation away from her family. It turned out that, unbeknown to anyone in her family, she had enrolled at UMD, I suppose as some kind of special student since she didn't finish high school, and was busy taking classes. To this day, I think of her when I enroll in a course or buy textbooks, and in some ways, I think part of the reason I've chosen to go to school is for her!

The other person who certainly influenced me to become a lifelong learner was my mother. Before I tell you a bit about her, I want you to know that my mother was, at least on the outside, as much of a 50's mother as

there was. She didn't work outside the home, she baked bread, and she wore housedresses. She grew up in Escanaba Michigan but moved to Chicago to attend Swedish Covenant Hospital School of Nursing for three years. After she completed that program, she worked in Chicago for a while and then moved back to Michigan. For her time, she was a well-educated woman who certainly had far more education than most of her contemporaries. Yet, she decided that she needed more schooling, and so she enrolled at Wheaton College. When I asked her later in her life about why she did that, her response was, "Well, I just knew that there was lots more to learn."

Because she had taken Bible courses at Wheaton, when she lived in Duluth, she ended up being an adult Sunday School teacher, and also made the circuit as a guest speaker at the Ladies Aid meetings. When she was at Wheaton, one of the classes that she took was archaeology. For some reason archaeology was a favorite of hers, so at some point she incorporated archaeology into her Ladies Aid talks. Now you have to understand she never went on a dig, she never took more than one course on the subject, but she really liked archaeology and felt that it made the Bible come alive. To have current information, of course, she needed to subscribe to the *Biblical Archaeology Review*, so she faithfully read her copy each month. As a young adult, I teased her unmercifully about giving archaeology lectures, but

she really didn't care. Learning was her passion, and she certainly wasn't going to let me get in the way of that. I still have her Bible, full of underlined words and notes, and sometimes I take it out when I feel like I'd give anything to hear one of those archaeology talks again. As I thought about my family's contributions to me, I reached a second conclusion about life long learning. It is something to be modeled.

As I thought about this idea of modeling life long learning, though, another question emerged...to what end do we model life long learning? After all Cliff Klaven on the television show *Cheers* was probably the consummate life long learner, and I suspect few of us would choose to emulate him. Well, my answer to that question came in an interesting way. One evening last week I was at home while my ninth grade daughter was doing her homework. I had been thinking about lifelong learning and so felt pretty confident in my new realization that I was a lifelong learner. She asked me a question about something related to health that I knew quite a bit about, so I began one of those much sought after lectures from mom. Not long into it, I looked at her and realized that she wasn't listening to a word that I was saying, causing me to rather quickly bring the lecture to a conclusion. When I stopped, she asked me the meaning of a word that was a medical term. I knew what the prefix, the suffix, and the root of the word

meant, but I still didn't know how the word was being used, so I said, "It's too bad my medical dictionary is at work," She responded with, "Well, let's try the on-line dictionary." Now I am familiar with on-line dictionaries, but I would always instinctively reach for a print dictionary first. (That comes with the lifelong aspect of being a learner.) So we went to the online dictionary but couldn't find the word. Then she said, "I wonder if there's an on-line medical dictionary." Now I never would have tried looking for a medical term that way, but we found an online dictionary and quite quickly figured out the meaning of the word. Then a few days later I was in my office at work and wanted to look up the meaning of a theological term. Suddenly, it came to my mind, "If there's an online medical dictionary, there is probably an on-line theological dictionary as well, so I looked up my word and, again, found what I needed. That experience helped me to draw my third conclusion about lifelong learning. It is something to be shared. Whether that sharing is with a child, a student, a friend, a co-worker, a recent immigrant, a senior citizen, lifelong learning is just more enjoyable when it can be shared. So, just as I look forward to some more long life to learn, I also look forward to all of the possibilities that learning will bring to my life.