Flâneurs of the fields
Robbie McClintock

In mid-June, 1958, I boarded a chartered TWA Constellation, along with a plane-full of kids, most of them four or five years younger than my 18, bound for Zurich, Switzerland. This was the start of a wonderful summer job that I would have through 1961 — a counselor, eventually program director, at the summer program of the American School in Switzerland. The school had started a year or two before, located in Locarno, overlooking the upper part of Lago Maggiore. Given the recent popularity of the film, *Roman Holiday*with Gregory Peck and Audrey Hepburn, the program was naturally called "Swiss Holiday," and the name fit.

My interview for the job, such as it was, as 90% of getting the job consisted of an inside track, centered on two questions — *Was I comfortable driving a stick shift?* And, *Did I know anything about summertime sports?* My answer to the first was that I loved to drive and the only cars worth driving had stick shifts. To the second, I confessed that I couldn't play tennis and hated golf, but I swam well and loved to water ski. Those answers seemed to suffice. I got the job, and 12 or so hours after getting on the June flight, we landed in Zurich, having stopped to refuel in Iceland. A couple school officials met us and whisked our herd of 50-plus kids, each trundling a duffel, through customs to a nearby parking lot.

Seven little light blue Volkswagen buses, racks on top, were lined up there. I was to find my nine charges, who would sit in three rows of three in the back; get their gear packed and tied down on top; and then follow the lead bus, driven by a school official, a Swiss who knew the way. A quick briefing informed me that we would be going over the Gotthard Pass, a legendary route across the Alps connecting the Ticino, the main Italian-speaking Canton with Zurich and the northern, German-speaking part of Switzerland. The drive to Locarno would take four to five hours on a narrow road, (vastly improved in the 1980s), and we would all stop to stretch and regroup at the top of the pass at a rest area with a nice little lake. *If you get separated, don't worry. Just follow signs to the Gotthard — beyond Zug, it's uphill, steeply so, with lots of hairpin turns, and there will be even more of those going down. Downshift a lot and keep the engine RPMs up.* And off we went, and after a while little voices from the back began asking whether I'd ever driven on roads like this before. I answered — *Sure. Do you think they would put me behind the wheel on a road like this without experience!* — trusting that experience was rapidly accruing and I was a quick learner, which it fortunately turned out that I was.

"Swiss Holiday" was structured in four two-week segments, with some added time at the beginning and the end. The two-week segments were divided between six days at the school with recreational activities and a gesture at more earnest classes, followed by eight days on the road in our trusty minibus, camping out, exploring our way

around Switzerland, northern Italy down to Rome, southern France, and Austria. I go into all this because these experiences, both the six-day respites at the school, and our exploratory forays into Europe, had some lasting influence on my later work and interests.

For one, the seeds of my theory of education, privileging study over instruction, were planted during the recreational periods at the school. Soon after we arrived in Locarno I understood the reason for the second of my interview questions and the good fortune in my answer. Since I had volunteered competence at water skiing, I discovered that I was designated a program water ski instructor when I wasn't out on a trip. And water skiing was the really popular "Swiss Holiday" sport. The next morning I went down to inspect. The boat was a little under-powered, but I figured that that mattered only with over-weight novices. The setting was spectacular — the upper end of a long finger lake, an area about 2 miles by 2 miles, framed by the southern edge of the Alps, which channeled the winds away from the water, leaving the lake surface almost always glassy. We were astonished to see the lake edged with palm trees. Could this be Switzerland? Now, with wealthy masses teaming, all sorts of boats crowd Lago Maggiore; but then ours was one of just a handful there. We would slalom to exhaustion in the sunset, a single undulating plume tracing its way back and forth across the lake.

Locarno, looking at where the school was

Maps of Lago Maggiori and the school location

Of course, I had never taught water skiing before, and of my own learning, I vaguely remembered that years before I had just sort of taken to it, getting up on my first try, barely managing to control skis that were a bit too large for my nine-year-old scale. But no matter. I was now working with another guy my age and we would trade off, one driving the boat and the other treading water, trying to coach each kid as the boat pulled them up. The natural athletes got the knack quickly. A few — over-weight,

sedentary, endowed with a weak grip — we tried to interest in other activities. Others we patiently coached — *try to keep the skis in front of you, slanting upwards with the rope between them;— just now, as you rose up out of the water, you were pulled forward in a belly-flop, so keep the skis in front and try to push more of the force on your arms down through your pelvis to your feet;— you're getting it, but this time you pulled up too quickly and then sagged backward, so let the boat raise you up and try to keep your arms bent a little, crouching some so you can respond to the play of forces*. Sound advice, but by itself, not enough. We would have to encourage these kids to keep trying, and with patience, theirs and ours, generally, sooner or later, something would click — *You did it!* — and the kid would have the hang of it thereafter. It was clear to us that the kids were not really applying our advice, but rather working it out for themselves, sometimes using something we said as a helpful hint in trying to control their own bodies through a turbulent transition.

My partner and I puzzled whether there was some way to get better at our appointed function. We experimented, trying to teach kids to ski by sitting on the edge of a dock, skis on the water, pushing them off as the rope tightened — it helped in some ways, especially with heavier kids because our under-powered boat labored too much pulling them up out of the water. Off the dock was great for advanced skiers: we would just stand at the edge, one foot in a slalom ski, and jump just as the slack rope tightened and whoosh, we were off. But it caused problems with kids prone to belly-flopping or sagging backward — the transition was too fast and they would fall too quickly, before their kinaesthetic sense could get the feel of what they were doing.

Thinking about it, with all the belly-flopping and sagging backwards and many comical spills, we concluded that water skiing was unteachable, but most people could learn it by using their experience and insights from observation and suggestions from others to inform their sense of how to synthesize and control a complex play of forces. Throughout my career in education, this experience working with people learning to water ski has been my primary paradigm for thinking about how a person learns and acquires a working understanding of any matter in which she will exercise active control.

A second important set of insights came on the road. In the days between travel, we would do a little preparation, but our trips were anything but packaged tours. We had a very rudimentary itinerary — for the Swiss instance, over the Simplon to Visp and camp up the valley towards Mont Blanc; then more or less follow the Arve river to Geneva and spend two nights in that area; then up to Lausanne for a night; on to Bern; back to Interlaken; up to Basle; across to Zurich; back by way of Luzern and then the Gotthard again. Two 18-20 year-olds would be in charge of nine 13-14 year-olds. We had a modest budget for food, gas, entrance fees, and the like, with instructions to plan as we went, to see as much as we could, and to return safely eight days after we left. Our minibus had a top speed of 80 kilometers per hour (50 mph), occasionally one could crank it up to 90 kph, so big highways would do it little good, and anyway those weren't in existence in Europe then, outside of Germany. We traveled secondary roads,

navigated with detailed maps, and had to keep a bunch of rambunctious kids engaged and interested. Except in large cities, we stayed away from organized campsites — life was simpler in a farmer's field and most were surprisingly accommodating.

Neither of us in charge had previously visited places on our routes, or near them; and whether the language was Italian, French, or German, our command of it was marginal at best. The kids were adventurous, after an initial break-in period in which they learned that they could survive, and even have fun, without plumbing, a proper kitchen, mattresses, or any shelter, unless it looked like rain, in which case our army-surplus tents often seemed to do more harm than good. Tangible sites to visit were much preferred to museums — often natural sites, like an unexpected lake to swim in, or a mountain field to run around on, or a breath-taking view high on a pass; and some human sites, a rampart to clamber along, the aqueduct at Nîmes, an unusual old bridge, with luck and a good story hook, a church or palace. Even when a bit bored, kids can ask challenging questions. *What's this? Why do they do that? How old is this building? Why did they build it?* And every bit of information can become itself a question — *What makes it Gothic? How do they know it is Roman? Why did they destroy those images?* Collective questions turned back on the kids could produce interesting discussions — *Hey guys, what do you think "Blutwurst" is? Should we get some for dinner?*

Maps, good detailed ones with hints about places coded into them, were essential. Among our meager supplies, perishables were kept in an icebox that every two or three days needed a new chunk of ice. We had been told that about the only place to get blocks of ice would be in the local brewery and most towns of modest size had one. It was not productive, however, let alone prudent, to pull up in the town center next to the local gendarme standing there, to lean out the window, a scruffy 18 year-old driving a minibus packed with squirming youngsters, to ask — *Hey, where's the brewery?* Even if the question got an answer, it would be ill-understood, directing us to someplace far from the town center. With a bunch of kids in tow, one quickly learns an essential commandment: thou shalt never be lost. One could put this into practice, more or less by following the rule: don't ask until the destination is nearly in sight. We quickly figured out that breweries were usually near freight yards and these could be located by looking for train tracks on a map and paying attention to the topography of a town. So before long, as the typical answer to our query, preferably addressed to a local laborer, we usually got something like — *Turn left over there and go 200 meters or so. You'll see it.*

You'll see it! That was the key. Fifty years later we have perhaps created an overly captioned world. Go into a big museum these days and count the ways people are being told what to see — headphones, information sheets, iPads and smartphones, human guides giving a standard patter. Are we losing the capacity to learn through experience? For us in our little bus, there wasn't time to study guidebooks, negotiate about potential destinations, and then find our ways to chosen spots. It was far better to catch something on a map that might be interesting and then discover it on our

way — *Gee, look at that. Let's go explore it!* I developed a rule of thumb for using a good map — scan it for symbols suggesting a ruin, a castle, an interesting panorama and then see which of possibilities had the tiniest road leading to it. Once in southern France this reasoning led us down a small road which seemed to lead into a large area that the map suggested had nothing in it, no roads, no towns, no streams or lakes, no distinguishing features — it must be some kind of wild park! We went up a long hill and at the top there stretched out before us the largest nuclear reactor installation you could imagine, huge cooling towers, surrounded by phalanxes of fencing and heavily armed towers every 100 meters or so. An unusual, instantaneous unanimity erupted — *Let's go back and try something else!*.

In northern Italy, my rule of thumb proved more successful. One evening, we were having trouble finding a suitable farmer's field. We had stopped for some quick supper by the side of the road and drove on, trusting I'd find some place that would be comfortable for us to sleep in our scattered fashion. Vineyards were everywhere with no place to spread out. It got dark; the kids, always restless, began to kvetch, louder and louder. I pulled to the side of the road and studied the map with a flashlight and saw a marking for a ruin not too far away with a little road going to it, with lots of hairpins turns. Off we went through the vineyards on the dirt track just wide enough for the minibus, weaving around for five kilometers or so, the last one up a really steep hill. Suddenly, the road ended at a wall, a high wall, a very old wall, one with battlements along its top with a rising full moon shining through. Our headlights shone on a door on the other side of a small, dried-up moat, a plank bridge leading to it. The door was slightly ajar. We looked in and there was a grassy space, perhaps 10 meters by 15, a perfect place to camp. We piled out, quickly settled down, tired kids tried telling ghost stories while watching the moon on the ramparts, but soon everyone was asleep.

Next morning a surprised but good natured caretaker awoke us. *How did we get here? — Well, up the little road as you can see.* Then in our turn: *But where are we? — Ah! You do not know! Esta Soave! El Castello di Soave! You have found a most beautiful place. Come! I will show you."* So, still in our clothes from the day before, as a prelude to breakfast, we were ushered all over the Castle of Soave, a small, then rather dilapidated, yet extraordinary castle on top of a high hill overlooking the town of Soave. The castle had stood since the 1300s, ramparts and vineyards sloping down to the outer fortifications at the foot of the hill. It had an outer courtyard where we had slept, a small inner courtyard all encircled by well-preserved walls and battlements. Our animated guide eagerly showed us all the secrets of the place. One could still easily see the power structure of the whole area, intact over centuries, with its economy there ripening before our eyes. Legend had it that none other than Dante Alighieri had named the place Soave, on tasting its smooth, suave wine. Twenty-five years later in an American restaurant a friend ordered a good Italian white. I glanced at the label and there unmistakably was pictured the castle atop the hill, vineyards and ramparts sloping down towards the town below — and memories of that night in the Castello di Soave rushed back to mind.

Aerial view of the Castello di Soave

From such adventures, my theory of communication and education took root. Experience of the material world should best precede knowledge about it. — *Here is a church portal. I wonder what it all means. When was it built? Who did it? Why would they bother? Did it get destroyed all at once? When?* As we wound our ways, our little worlds of material knowledge developed a sequence — days and places. We had some sources of information. Guide books were not yet a big publishing genre and generally, as I recall, for whatever country we would have a Baedeker, which still then leaned heavily towards the pedantic, especially relative to the sensibilities of Americans just entering their teens. We would pick up some brochures as we went along, although they were not then plentiful. We used such sources to back fill — checking, correcting, and improving responses we had come up with *ad hoc* by looking intelligently at things we saw. Opportunities built up to develop comparisons within the sphere of things we had seen — *How does this church differ from the one we stopped at the first day out?* Our information was often shaky, but our experience was both growing and real. It was good education.

Things, I learned — material objects and actions communicate a lot about themselves, and through themselves about life and the world, to anyone who will take the trouble to read them. These experiences tearing around Europe with my minibus full of kids provided me the foundation upon which I developed my interest in the history of communication, and much in the history of educational and cultural thought. So much in our literature records, albeit on a grander scale, exactly what we had been

doing — recording a person's movement at a time and in a place, noting what he saw and did, so the reader can ponder the significance — Homer's *Odyssey*, Vergil's *The Aeneid*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Cervantes' *Don Quijote*, up to Twain's *Huck Finn* going down the Mississippi and Joyce's *Ulysses* with Bloom's day in Dublin, and beyond. Life is a meaningful movement in the space and time of the material world — an *"I"* linked to a *"my circumstances"*. Formal education is too sedentary — instead of schools let's invent *pedabuggies*.