

7/13/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 14C – The Word of the Guru

More than any other of the Notes, I'm tempted to simply reprint Nitya's text and leave it at that. It's utterly lucid and complete, Nitya at his very best. Yet the class produced a lively discussion, and we padded Nitya's wisdom out through sharing our personal experiences.

This was Moni-chechi's first class after three months in India, caring for her dying brother and then having her stay prolonged by pandemic travel restrictions. As yet unadjusted to the time zone, she presided as an *éminence grise*, wearing a happy smile, and perhaps dozing a bit. This was in keeping with one of our themes, that our admiration for a guru may have outward fixations, but beneath the surface a vast spiritual communication is passing between the two poles. The outer attention serves to quiet, almost hypnotize, the mind, to minimize the friction of intuitive transmission. Outwardly we may be separate individuals with attention-grabbing sensory systems, but we are also electromagnetic fields interpenetrating one another below the radar. I'll add more to this in Part II.

Deb hinted at this in her opening monologue. In our Brihadaranyaka Upanishad study we are currently focused on the Gayatri mantra, and when she chants it, it is like letting go of her problems and preconceptions and allowing some unstructured understanding to arise, by not having expectations. The Word of the Guru is similar, allowing us to let go of our solidified concepts and access something with a more transparent and fluid understanding.

I reassured the group that the chapter is recounting an archaic version of the guru-disciple relationship that can seem very strange, but it's easy to translate the terms to see it as the way you relate to your primary interests, such as your love for poetry, art, music, any inventiveness. The love magnetism can take in a

person, a process, or a learning program. All these contain the same dynamic undercurrent that is the intent of the Word as it's used here: a force of constructive dynamism that builds and transforms things, that includes us as a participant in that creative process.

It's easy for a mature adult in the West to be horrified by the strictness of traditional Indian disciplines. The gist is about absorbing a subject, any subject, and making it yours, so you can live it with expertise. You don't necessarily have to surrender to another person—though some of us did, once upon a time, and found it ineffably transformative—the polarity can be between you and your interests, your drive. Your dharma. The external guru-factor is helpful to avoid our own egos coopting the process and making it one-sided, in what Nataraja Guru called a one-legged argument that is sure to tip over.

Notwithstanding the universal application, the focus here is on personal transformation, so as to optimize our efficiency and value. This section begins with the line, "To the guru the Word is the secret key to the total personality." Nitya proclaims:

Bringing the Word aspect of the guru in resonance with the Word aspect of the disciple can cover the entire field of interpersonal transactions as well as very profound and intimate depths of transsubjective empathy.

Three aspects of this empathy, which is clearly a force rather than any selected verbiage, are spelled out:

When the disciple is at a low ebb of spiritual stamina, the guru compassionately identifies with the disciple's main drive or interest and transfuses into them his own faith, confidence, courage and insight. This must be continued until the disciple can regain a level of stability to go on to the next step with a correct perspective.

On the other hand, if the disciple is sinking into the

quicksand of self-created fantasies or is afflicted with a grievous onslaught of mental pathology, it is not at all helpful to identify with the disciple's interest. In that case the guru may resort to the tactic of a sharp and shocking confrontation to rouse the psyche from the shackles of exaggerated emotions.

In still another case the disciple may already be mature enough to emerge from the chrysalis more or less unassisted, and all the guru has to do is to give an incentive for them to break out of the shell of their solidified conceptual notions.

I reiterated that within the class we are not in the position of the second option, of offering sharp criticism to rouse a slumbering psyche. Those of us who survived a dose or two of it in our younger days are eternally grateful for its blessings, however, and we'll get to that later. What we do offer, and with some efficacy thanks to the guru-insights we expound on, is provide an alternative to a seeker's "solidified conceptual notions" that can weigh them down and extinguish their joy of living. Emerging from one's chrysalis is primarily a voluntary process, impelled by nature itself. There is also a measure of the compassionate support of the first option permitted, provided at the level of friendship rather than guru-rescue.

Despite this, Nitya's account of the classic guru-disciple relationship brought up much reminiscing among the old hands. Deb cited this excerpt:

What is once heard is heard again and again, but the repetition is by no means monotonous. When the guru's Word re-echoes, it is not just an echo, it is the opening up of the Word in a new way with a new profundity. Consequently the reflection of it amounts to an attainment that is far superior to anything lived before.

So yes, the Word can be clothed in words, and often is. Many times Nitya told Deb something, or made a general point, and each

time she heard it the words were so apt for her they unlocked a deeper and deeper meaning. It has made her an ardent believer in Nitya's sentence here: "A true master is one who has insight into the paradox of the dual aspects of existence in their ten thousand modes of nondual operation." So many thousands!

It was readily apparent that Nitya could see right through our delusions and obfuscations, instantly. We are conditioned to resist others knowing us, yet the gentle repetition of certain truths can eventually penetrate our protective shield. Accepting a correction after due consideration teaches you that holding on to your opinion of yourself isn't so valuable. That kind of bipolarity can only arise in a situation of dependable and tested trust where you can safely let go of your defenses.

Steven was intrigued by the analogy of pursuing our interests being in accord with a spiritual path. Reading sections of this book he has found himself nostalgic for the times he spent with Nitya, and he's most desirous of making that influence relevant to his life now. He has recently taken up painting as a daily practice, and found there is something about the path of creativity where not only are you learning a skill but there is a subtle transformation of the self that feels to him like spiritual growth. It has brought him a sense of humility, knowing there are powers that are greater than us that are the source of our creativity. Participating in a community of people involved in a similar practice, gives him a feeling of being involved with something greater than himself.

I offered that our artistic practices follow the same pattern Nitya describes for guru-training: there is a lot of repetition to learn any skill. Thinking about having a nonpareil guru makes the training seem a rare blessing, and it is, but anyone can think about how these principles apply to their life. It should never be thought of as being unavailable to us, and we work to apply it broadly. I also wanted to make it clear that in our classes we aren't advocating that seekers should automatically look around for someone to surrender to. As many of us found in the days of unquestioning acceptance of anyone wearing a beard and a robe,

maintaining common sense is also a disciple's job. Abandoning it leaves you open to exploitation, so trust has to be well-developed first. This brings up a very important theme of this chapter:

A disciple cannot straightaway surrender his mind or individuated self to his guru for the simple reason that the disciple is not at all clear in his mind as to what the self is. When he is so troubled and tormented by a capricious mind over which he has little or no control, how can he ever make a gift of it to his guru?

Many of us in the Sixties and Seventies were convinced by books like *Autobiography of a Yogi*, perhaps further propelled by drug-stimulated fantasies, that immediate surrender was the high road to enlightenment. Those "gurus" who went along with it were raking in the dough, which has ever been evidence of "God's grace." If we'd known better, Nitya's reluctance was a really good indicator that he wanted nothing to do with such games.

Andy related that he doesn't think of Nitya as having died or being absent from his life. He is the light in Andy's ability to experience the world, the center of the apparatus through which he engages with everything. He admitted that when Nitya was alive he was very uncomfortable around him. Perhaps because he was so radically free, he found Nitya scary to hang out with. Happily, he was the beneficiary of the "shock treatment" in a critical moment of his life, and he's forever grateful for it.

Andy related a period when a number of us were in Hawaii, 1978, when Nitya relentlessly laid into him for two weeks. At the end of that time, after much harsh vocal criticism, Nitya came right up to him, held out the key to the house they had been staying in, and told him, "I want you to take very good care of the place while I'm gone." It definitively marked the closure of that episode. Andy could see that the guru-blast had somehow cut through all his bullshit and turned him around.

I related Johnny's version of the same technique, of one time

when he was in Ooty, back when we regularly had what was later named by Peter O “Gurukula Grilling.” In those days Nitya sat in a chair on the altar platform, facing the room and us, an extra-intimidating position, amidst all the icons and deities. (Later he humbly moved to the center of the audience side, next to us.) Girls were on the right, boys on the left, Kerala style, all of us hoping not to be noticed by Nitya’s fickle finger of fate, where our foibles and weaknesses would be publicly vetted. Few of us imagined we had a clue what was really going on with the philosophy. On that occasion Nitya spent what Johnny recalled as a half hour lambasting him in front of everyone, eradicating everything he believed in and wished for, and running him down with insults. Johnny was devastated, stunned, practically in tears. Then Nitya asked him, “What are you so upset about?” Johnny responded, “Well, you’ve practically destroyed my life, dismantled it, for one thing.” Nitya cut in, “That was back then, in the past.”

It might have been a version of Nataraja Guru’s lightly slapping Nitya and saying, “I am beating you so that the world will not beat you.” It’s some consolation, but it still hurts.

Andy was once having a conversation with Tyagi, describing the experience of being raked over coals in the Prayer Hall, and how Nitya was doing it all *in public*, as if that made it worse. Tyagi’s reply was “In public, ohhhh!” Andy knew exactly what he meant: there is no public or private. If we take the guru at his word, we’re all manifestations of consciousness, pure Absolute consciousness, and nothing is hidden within that.

Anita’s closest relatable experience was with a shaman that she worked with for a period in the aughts. As with Nitya for some of us, she reported that when she was in his presence she was uncomfortable, feeling like she was naked. He called her on all the things we humans do to hide, and seemed to know things that were impossible to know about her. Their relationship encouraged her to become a braver, more honest person.

Deb has found that our family members can serve as that kind of challenging guru to us, and they are in relationships you

can't just make disappear. Our kids keenly watch what we do, and are not fooled by what we say about all the things we would prefer not to acknowledge. Her kids voted her the most judgmental person in our family, something that simply *couldn't* be true!

Anita concurred, admitting our kids see us every day and they don't let us get away with anything. Curiously, I had just sent Anita an account of success she'd had dealing with her daughter, and I'll put it in Part II. It's from the Nirvana Darsana class notes of 2008, and is quite commendable. Spiritualized parenting, Gurukula style.

Jan nodded knowingly about our defenses and judgments, saying it's mainly in our relationships where these attitudes come up, activating our emotions. They are common themes that run through everyone's life. I think she meant we need these kinds of relationships to activate our self-knowledge, or at least our self-awareness.

Deb concluded we think we have it together and our motives are hidden, but most of us are pretty transparent. It's true: any guru or close friend or therapist can see through our carefully crafted obfuscation. Nitya was a master at it. Hint: the crafting alone gives it away.

Paul gets frustrated by his family when he is trying to understand truth or embrace freedom. He's found that whenever someone acts differently in a family, the others start correcting them, and he's really tired of being told how he should think or act. He had a unique take on Nitya's famous advice to Deb to one day have less of a need to defend herself. Defending your right to act freely, outside of limited familial, cultural or religious guidelines, is a good thing, whereas defending your own insecurities is merely the ego kicking up dust, and is an impediment. It's tricky terrain. Sometimes we get it right, and sometimes we don't. There's so much we don't see of the context because it isn't what we expect. Paul's advice was to honor the unexpected. And almost everything is unexpected.

Steven had one brief contact with Nitya when he was staying

on Hall Street, the only time after 1971. He was giving lectures and Steven went to one, thinking “I have evolved beyond this guru thing, I’m a historical materialist now, reading Marx.” Nitya saw him in the audience and made one comment to him: “I can tell you’ve been out doing what you need to do.” Steven was only 18 in the first Portland Gurukula, and had no life experience yet. The message he took away was one of encouragement: it’s a good thing you’re doing, you’re growing from it. He found Nitya’s words and Word to be unexpected fodder for spiritual insight.

Getting back to the shock and awe theme, of course, we might “get it” when something like this happens to us, but we don’t get over it in an instant, unless we’re already fully realized, which we aren’t. No need to correct the already-realized. Those painful psychic shocks reverberate for a long time, working their magic so long as they don’t overwhelm us. Nitya the Magician was careful to perform this only with those who were up to it, if not consciously up *for* it. In my case I figure I reaped about four years of mental agony trying to make sense of what had hit me, before my normal ebullience reasserted itself. I immediately felt like I owed Nitya a very great deal, that he was doing all the giving and I was doing all the taking. So I offered him my services, pledging whatever he needed me to do, I would carry out. He inaugurated my book editing career, a wise choice, if I do say so. He knew more about my dharma than I did, obviously. It’s impossible to overstate my gratitude to him.

Nitya refers to this stage of the disciple in a traditional way:

The only aspect of himself over which he has some measure of control is the physical body. So to begin with, the disciple offers physical service to that person in whom he sees the Guru shining. This is symbolically expressed by the seekers in India by bringing the guru an armload of firewood to build the sacred fire of sacrifice.



“Sacrifice” means making sacred. My being grilled over a hot fire had made our relationship sacred, or had begun making it so. Now I feel like Andy: Nitya has continued to be a more essential presence in my life every day, every minute, really. I’m still me, yet he is here too. And he isn’t half so scary as a disembodied spirit.

The idea of service to balance the scales of justice is given an important nuance here, de-trivializing a popular notion of yoga that asanas are simply calisthenic exercises:

By sharing life through service the disciple gets a chance to be in the immediate physical presence of the guru, which is recommended in the yoga discipline as *asana*. Asana means a sitting posture, but in the larger context of spiritual discipline it is to be understood as the stabilizing of an attitude in which you make yourself steady and comfortable in relating to your guru.

Nitya elaborates on the stabilization process, and I’ll clip that into Part II. Briefly, there are three stages: “Listening, meditating on the meaning of what is heard, and living the truth of what is revealed.” He reminds us this is not a sequence, the three parts go together.

Andy revisited the operation of the Word as a medium for disciple and guru to meet. He rhetorically asked us, “how do you see that operating in your life?” Andy often feels like he’s living in *aum*: his world is a stage and he’s in it and can’t step off it. He feels like Guru Nitya is at the center of that stage. Especially when he’s feeling very calm, it’s like he’s sitting with Nitya, and the Word is in operation.

After sharing so much depth of feeling and communication between a guru and their disciples, Nitya asks, “How can this story ever be told when someone pushes open your door and abruptly asks you to be their guru? The very vulgarity of it puts you off.” I shudder every time I read this, and I’ve read it hundreds of times,

because I was one of those. At least, I did knock first, before barging in, heart rate over 200, and hurriedly requested something that must have sounded like \*IKJ)(\* &T%^&^%\$Y. I've clipped my version of the Fool and the Magician in Part II.

Nitya ends this stunning chapter with a lovely bit of consolation, ideal for meditation:

In most cases spiritual growth is not immediately spectacular, and the disciple does not notice how much growth or change has taken place. If you are continuously watching a plant, you don't see it growing. All the same it is a little bit different every day. After attaining to a certain growth, the disciple's sensibility becomes keen, and there is an inner assurance of an ever-new path through which you are finding your way every moment. This certainly brings an immeasurable joy to know that you are living a life that is entirely original and which is intrinsically beautiful....

The beauty and sacredness of kneeling before the altar of wisdom is recognized only when it is experienced. All that one can tell the hasty seeker is, "Wait. Have patience."

## Part II

My account in Flip Flop ([https://nitya-teachings.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/5/6/125633769/flip\\_flop\\_\\_1983\\_.pdf](https://nitya-teachings.weebly.com/uploads/1/2/5/6/125633769/flip_flop__1983_.pdf)) of requesting discipleship :

American ideas of Indian Gurus mostly come from books, and these all speak of the student requesting discipleship from the master, whereupon he performs a few mystical and incomprehensible actions, demands an additional number of unusual services of the student, taps him on the forehead three times, and sends him into instant and total realization. So with this scheme and several other preconceptions in mind I entered Nitya's room one day and asked him to be my Guru. He wasn't interested.

He wasn't interested!?

Not interested! *That* didn't fit the scheme. And with me only two or three steps short of enlightenment and everything so far going by the book! This Swami fellow, the key to all the imagined wonders, just kicked my whole mental orientation far out to sea where a huge, ugly fish ate it up. To add to the shock he added a few less than complimentary comments about my inner nature, and within a few days I went from being the great and wise disciple to being the biggest fool on the face of the Earth. My ego was crushed. My heart felt like a fierce fire, which would be stirred occasionally to allow for more complete combustion. While I imagined Nitya to be the source of this misery, I began to see how in my ignorance I had brought it all upon myself with my projections, and that he had remained detached and uninterested beyond all my psychic twisting and turning. I, an unprepared neophyte, had merely met the Guru, and from our brief encounter reaped many years of confusion and sadness. So much for the mechanical sureness of the path. So much for the certitude of knowing a Guru. So much for the ease and pleasure of the Way. So many illusions gone. So much humility yet to be cultivated!

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From the chapter, on achieving stabilization, or *asana*:

The first phase of spiritual alchemy is attaining a capacity to efface the physical duality of you and your guru. It's like becoming one person with two sensory systems and two sets of the organs of action. Once this attitude is established, it no longer matters where you go or where your guru is.

This brings you to the second phase of the discipline. Every word you have heard from your guru, every expression you have witnessed in the guru's face, every occasion that prompted the guru to initiate or to put off, to articulate or to go into silence, to turn on or tune in, is now remembered. Each recollection is

followed by deeply pondering its significance. Even the guru's engagement in a trifling activity or the quality of his rest or sleep stimulates you to have a new look at yourself. This ensures that the teaching that is imparted and received is wholesale and not piecemeal instruction.

This aspect of the discipline is called *manana*. *Man* means mind. *Manana* means applying the mind.

The mind is like quicksilver: when you try to hold onto it, it slips away from one interest to another. The discipline requires the student to bring the receding attention back again and again to the assigned subject. Stabilizing the mind in one place continuously for a long time is a discipline recommended by Patanjali to gain the seat of steadfastness.

Living the teaching is the third stage of discipline, and is called *nididhyasa*.

Steven was touched by this passage in text: how closely the disciple observes the guru. It brought back to him how intently he had observed Nitya, how convincing his mannerisms were, the gentleness of his voice, the way he moved, all bespoke some inner realization that he had obtained. He perceived him literally as an embodiment, though it's an open question to what extent this was projection. Regardless, something in his bearing was uncanny, and watching him was a spiritual practice in and of itself. It included meditating on Guru Nitya's way of being in the world, and he felt a resonance through it.

I agreed wholeheartedly. While you're thinking you're simply looking, there is a huge transmission going on between your hearts, like the magnets I spoke of earlier. Nitya often talked about his fascination with Nataraja Guru, noting every detail of how he acted and reacted, even including his dress and mannerisms. It puts you in a most receptive state. I wonder how it looks from the other side....

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All morning I've been humming the Beatles' catchy take on the Word, at the inception of their psychedelic period:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RfBEqiEhCgM>

## The Word

Say the word and you'll be free  
Say the word and be like me  
Say the word I'm thinking of  
Have you heard the word is love?

It's so fine, it's sunshine  
It's the word, love

In the beginning I misunderstood  
But now I've got it, the word is good

Spread the word and you'll be free  
Spread the word and be like me  
Spread the word I'm thinking of  
Have you heard the word is love?

It's so fine, it's sunshine  
It's the word, love

Everywhere I go I hear it said  
In the good and bad books that I have read

Say the word and you'll be free  
Say the word and be like me  
Say the word I'm thinking of  
Have you heard the word is love?

It's so fine, it's sunshine  
It's the word, love

Now that I know what I feel must be right  
I'm here to show everybody the light  
Give the word a chance to say  
That the word is just the way  
It's the word I'm thinking of  
And the only word is love

It's so fine, it's sunshine  
It's the word, love  
Say the word love  
Say the word love  
Say the word love  
Say the word love

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This is from the March 2008 class notes, on Anita's expertise in action. The first 5 paragraphs are included by way of introduction, if you want to skip down.

3/25/8

Having burned everything with the fire of wisdom, aiming the good of the world, doing action according to injunction, the knower of *brahma* remains firm in *brahma*. (X, 5)

As noted in the introduction, this is the climax of our detailed study of Narayana Guru's masterwork. In it there is a full and expert integration of the horizontal and vertical aspects of life, of perfect participation of the enlightened seer with the needs of the seeker, or with the needs of the world surrounding them. Guided by Narayana Guru's wisdom in this case, we have been invited to bathe in the ocean of wisdom and mercy, but not yet to drown

ourselves in it. Drowning will come of its own accord, in time. We are here asked to pop back out, glistening wet, and share the bounty of our refreshing swim with our fellow beings.

We should examine this verse closely, as it could be glossed over as four clichés if we aren't careful. Having burned everything in the fire of wisdom sounds rather traumatic, but in reality it has been a gentle project for the most part. We have examined our ego-based motivations and found that they spring from disturbances in our psyche. The disturbances engender responses to stimuli, and the stimuli themselves are responses to previous stimuli, and so on ad infinitum to the beginning of time. Contemplation has directed us to step back from this conveyor belt mentality, to quit the drudgery of our assembly-line existence and experiment with freedom. We want to be more than mere automatons responding in predictable ways to characteristic stimulations.

Aiming the good of the world has many possible interpretations. Nitya tells us, "The good of the world is constantly turning it from falsehood to truth, ignorance to knowledge, and expenditure to conservation." But this can't be thought of dualistically: "I'm a wise person, so I'm going to turn you to my knowledge." This gives us obnoxious pests, not to mention dictators and mass murderers. What is meant is that after bathing in the ocean, you no longer feel that your needs and opinions trump everyone else's. Your consciousness has expanded to include the whole situation, of which you are only one aspect.

Because it is easy for the ego to sneak back into the picture and tilt the balance in our own favor, Narayana Guru recommends acting via injunction. In other words, well-known scriptural admonitions can cover the general pattern of our lives, and the advice of friends and teachers can help flesh this out into practical courses of action. It's not that we think, "What does the Gita tell me to do?" or "What does the Bible or the Koran tell me to do?" That will lead us to fanaticism, or at best highly inhibited action. We should act freely and unitively, but we have guideposts such as Thou shall not kill or steal, Love your neighbor, or adages like that

to keep us from losing our good sense. We can see that the second and third clauses of this verse form a complementary set of inner drive and outer guidance.

And of course standing firm in the neutrality of an absolutist vision is the best assurance of our continuing to adhere to sane principles. This is the most general injunction of all: that we continually have recourse to the universal ground within, we constantly turn to That, to give us the opportunity to stand outside ourselves and appraise all things circumspectly, without prejudice.

Anita gave us an excellent example of how to live this verse in actual conditions. Recently she went to visit her daughter and three grandchildren. She related several breakthroughs in her relationship with her daughter, but the most relevant one happened during a conversation about her upbringing. The daughter complained about some things that had gone wrong during her teen years, with implicit blame being laid on Anita for failing to somehow avert them. Most of us in a similar situation will try to defend ourselves, asserting that we weren't responsible, we didn't mean it, and all that. Many a discussion is a thinly veiled game of thrust and parry between hurt egos. Anita realized that defending herself was unnecessary and counterproductive, so she merely responded "It must have been very painful for you." And that was enough. The daughter was secretly asking for sympathy, and she got it. Unfortunately but typically, she wasn't aware of her needs, and so blamed the other, in this case the M-other, which always leads to strife instead of reconciliation. But Anita was wise enough to see the need beneath the surface game, and responded to that instead. When she got ready to leave for home, the daughter said, "Mom, this was the mellowest visit ever." Which was a high compliment indeed.

We can trace the four elements of this verse in this tale. Anita has relinquished at least some of her own needs for reassurance and outer support through her dedication to wisdom studies over a pretty good period of time now. As she said to herself on the way



home from her visit, do I need the other person to act in a certain way for me to love them? No, I love them, and that's what matters. Period. So Anita has burned away her need for certain classes of affection by seeing deeper into what really matters. Her superficial desires are burned up, because they could never again satisfy her. Real love is so much more substantial than lip service!

Then, Anita aimed the good of the world, which in this case took the form of her relationship with her daughter. The world comes to us in many forms, but it never comes to us all at once—we get it in dribs and drabs. Last week the world for Anita was her family in Arizona, and she wanted very much to have things go well. She was helped in this by some injunctions, things she has learned in many contexts, including Gurukula classes. She had some good advice, mentally chewed on it to make it her own, and was prepared to give it her best shot. It turned out to be a very good shot.

Lastly, remaining firm in brahman. When Anita's daughter accused her of dereliction, she probably felt that ego twinge that propels us into the defensive mode. This is a very commonly experienced trigger. But Anita held firm to her neutrality. She disciplined herself to stay centered, and thus was able to rise above herself to offer sympathy instead of antipathy. By doing so she surprised her daughter, and gave her a chance to back down from her position and feel more “mellow.”

This is what newspapers should report on, instead of this week's car wrecks. This was a major event. “Mother and daughter successfully communicate!” screams the banner headline. Or how about “Breakthrough at Black Rock!” Even “Accident fails to Happen!” And a perfect fit with our class to boot.