

# Seemingly Benign and Not So Benign Every Day Occurrences and Words

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You never know when words, phrases, photographs, images, strategies, and ideas for stories or practical classroom exercises will pop up, but if you keep your mind open to snag them when they come, you can retain a fluid inventory of notes and potential. Seemingly benign everyday occurrences can remain benign, but also have the possibility of becoming poems, discussion starters, pedagogical strategies, games, stories, reminders, or even books. Words and images can evoke reflection, give birth to a classroom discussion or inspire disturbing contemplation. Sometimes I find the ideas on my walks around the neighbourhood. Sometimes they find me, like recently at the Minnesota State Capitol.

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## Evoked Reflection

We often miss the art of life because we are going too fast or we fail to open our souls to capture the fragile and fleeting beauty in our surroundings and people we meet as we go about our day. On my bike ride to the university recently, I came up behind a man riding a bicycle pulling a child bike carrier heaped high with stuff. Most of the stuff was tucked under a plastic tarp of sorts, but a pillow and what looked like a metal bed frame bobbed on the side. When the man biked through an intersection in front of me, a wooden jewelry box fell from his bike carrier right into the middle of the street. I stooped to pick up the empty box and handed it to him when I crossed to the other side where he was. He took the box with soiled work-worn hands. His clothes seemed to have only a very faint memory of soap and water.

“Looks like you’re moving,” I said.

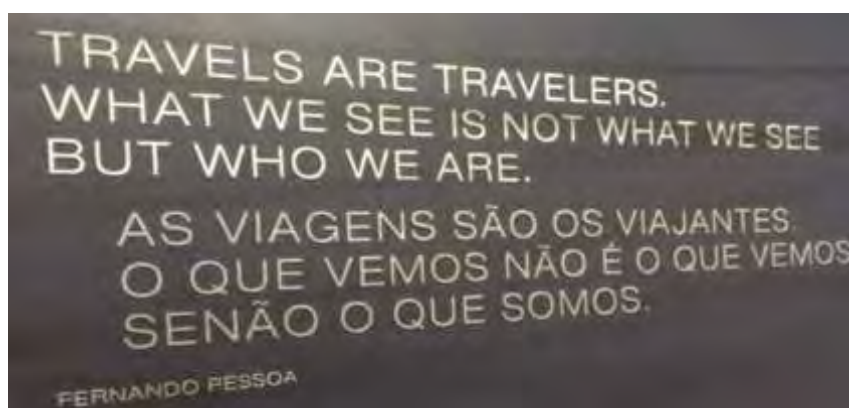
“Into my own place,” he beamed. “Moving my stuff in shifts.”

“Nice,” I said.

“It’s more than nice. I am 59 years old and I spent six months on the street. That was the hardest thing I ever did. My new home is more than nice.”

“Enjoy your new home,” I said as we parted ways.

I later thought about the few words exchanged and the image of the man pulling all his belongings in a bike carrier to his new home, next to high-heeled women and shiny-shoed men in tailored business suits walking briskly down the sidewalk to gleaming office buildings. As the business world clocked in another day of mundane work, this man celebrated having a new home. We should all have stopped and celebrated with coffee and cinnamon rolls at Tim Hortons. Then I would have asked the man who the jewelry box had belonged to, what treasures it used to hold, and what other stories he had to share with us. The image of the man proudly biking down the street moving his belongings in shifts to his new home remained with me for a long time. He captured the art of life, which many of us miss in our rush to get to where we are going and back again. It reminded me of a quotation in an airport by Fernando Pessoa:



Had the man’s jewelry box not dropped in the middle of the street right in front of me, I may not have seen past his outward appearance. What I saw after that very brief interchange with him was much more than a man biking down the sidewalk with a carrier heaped high with belongings. He represented a story in motion, into which he gave me a brief glimpse.

**Classroom discussion**

Transformative wavelengths are latent even in a bothersome speeding ticket. Recently, I opened the mailbox to find an envelope with the return address from the police service. Even though I did not have any recollection of recent infractions with the law, I still opened the envelope with unease, only to be stunned with a \$221 speeding ticket. It was an image capturing ticket with indeed a photograph of my vehicle’s license plate. Apparently, my vehicle had been going 63 kilometre per hour in a 50 kilometre per hour zone, this in a family where most of us bike wherever we need to go. I put the ticket away for later payment, thinking you can’t argue with a camera. When my young son, who was learning to drive, came home we studied the ticket to see where the infraction occurred and which family member possibly could have been driving our vehicle. By retracing our steps and looking at the calendar to see what and where our family’s schedule was taking us that day, we deduced the location and driver. That person would be responsible for the ticket.

With just a little detective work we realized that from where we turned and the location of the camera that took the image of our license plate, there was no speed limit sign and it was not a construction zone to warrant such a heavy ticket. Since my name is on the vehicle’s title, I was armed to do battle with the law. This was simply not fair, so locking my bike outside the ominous parking authority with helmet in hand, I went in to confront and challenge the law. An hour later after standing in various lines, I appeared before the judge. I explained my side of the story, was told that not knowing speed limits was not a sufficient excuse for speeding, but he would reduce the ticket to \$100.

**TIME TO PAY / DÉLAI DE PAIEMENT**

NAME / NOM AU COMPLET: **FRIESEN, HELEN L**

DISPOSITION DATE / DATE DE LA DÉCISION: **25-Sep-2017/25 sep. 2017**

OFFENCE / INFRACTION: **Speeding - SPEED-SCHOOL AT WB GRANT AVE WEST OF THURSO ST S.**

Ticket Number Numéro de contravention	Offence Date Date de l'infraction	Original Amount of Ticket le montant initial de la contravention	Amount Due Montant dû
<b>71179920</b>	<b>8-Sep-2017/8 sep. 2017</b>	<b>\$221.00</b>	<b>\$100.00</b>

DUE DATE / DATE D'EXIGIBILITÉ  
**30-Nov-2017/30 nov. 2017**

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**HOW TO PAY THIS TICKET**

**a) ONLINE:\***  
[www.manitoba.ca/finepayment](http://www.manitoba.ca/finepayment)

- Pay your ticket by Visa or MasterCard
- There is no fee for this service
- Only full payments can be made online.

**COMMENT PAYER LA PRÉSENTE CONTRAVENTION**

**a) EN LIGNE:\***  
[www.manitoba.ca/finepayment](http://www.manitoba.ca/finepayment)

- Payer votre avis par Visa ou MasterCard
- Il n'y a aucun frais pour ce service

What seemed like a huge inconvenience turned into a great classroom assignment that week. My students had completed a diction field trip analysis where they were tasked with analyzing the writing they observed around the university campus and were now working on a critique. The assignment that I invented as a result of my speeding ticket experience turned into a critique activity which I called: “That is totally and completely unfair.” After I told the students about my speeding ticket scenario, I invited students to get into groups of three or four. In their groups, they were to tell their tale of an unfair event. After each student had told about an unfair event, the group voted on who would go to the Judicial Justice of the Peace (JPP) with their story to request clemency. Students volunteered to play the role of JPP. The class then became the courtroom. Students drew their scenarios on the board or explained in detail, incidents that had happened recently or many years ago.

Students asked thoughtful questions as they cross-examined the case and eventually, the volunteer JPPs announced their decision, which in all cases was much more compassionate than what actually happened in real life. As I walked out of the classroom that day, I was not only completely surprised by the students' engagement in the practical and oral critique, but in their compassion for each other.

## Contemplation

As I write this, a cool breeze is welcoming the change of seasons. The forest behind my yard is slowly shedding its summer garment in exchange for winter austerity. In solitude, contemplation, and reflection I strive to embrace life to its fullest. Sometimes reflection does not lead to a place of serenity or peace at all, but to a place of extreme disturbance and unrest. Such was the case on a serendipitous field trip that I happened upon in the State Capitol of Minnesota. I had been in St. Paul presenting at a conference. My topic was on the Indigenous course requirement that The University of Winnipeg implemented a year ago. A student and I had conducted research on how the first year of the requirement went, and I was presenting on our findings and on the pedagogical innovations the course requires.

After the conference, I had a few hours before my return flight to Winnipeg. Since I had not had any time to explore the neighbourhood during the packed conference, I went for a run after the conference ended. The conference hotel was just a few blocks from the State Capitol, so I wandered in to look around. I had done a little research on the Indigenous history in Minnesota, just enough to know the traditional territory on which we were located. I wish I would have gone on the field trip before my presentation. I would have invited the group to a tour of the State Capitol and specifically the Governor's Reception Room, which told the ever so tragically familiar history of most North American communities, the story of displacement and of treaties signed without proper understanding of long-term implications.

A tour was in process at the Capitol, so I tagged along behind. The last location for the tour was an Art Gallery in the Governor's Reception Room, that among other art and informational plaques, also featured the history of the signing of treaties with Indigenous peoples in the Minnesota area. Large paintings hung on the wall. One of the paintings was of The Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, c. 1905.



*Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society*

The Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, c. 1905; Francis D. Millet; Oil on canvas; 7'4" x 10'5"; Governor's Reception Room Installed 1905.

As the tour guide pointed to this large painting, she explained that although the painting depicted a peaceful negotiation between settlers and Indigenous peoples, what actually happened was far from that. According to Minnesota Treaties in 1805, the Dakota surrendered or were forced to surrender 100,000 acres of land to the United States government to build a military fort and later land was sold to settlers who moved west. Of the seven Indigenous leaders of the area, only two were present for the signing of the treaty that day. The land was valued at \$200,000, but the Indigenous leaders were only given gifts valued at \$200. Usually, the Indigenous leaders signing treaties did not speak English fluently and therefore did not know exactly what the treaties said or meant (Minnesota Treaties, 2008). The treaties that forced the Dakotas onto reservations severely restricted their subsistence traditions (Wakefield, 2002). Native American scholar and professor Treuer (2016) states: “So, with the treaty, you can look, for example at somebody like Sibley, who married a Dakota woman in order to cement trade relationships with an entire group of people, and then cast her off and had no use for her once he had ascended, financially and politically.”

Many treaties served to benefit the government and settlers such as the following 1837 treaties:

**The treaties of 1837**  
**Date: 7/29/1837**

"At Ft. Snelling In 1837, the Ojibwe ceded their land between the St. Croix and Mississippi Rivers north of the Dakota/Ojibwe "boundary" established in 1825 and south of the Crow Wing River. This cession totaled more than 12 million acres, and it included Lake Mille Lacs. In exchange, the government paid the Indians' debts to traders and gave tribal members cash and goods in annual payments called "annuities." Under the treaty, the Ojibwe retained hunting, fishing, and rice- harvesting rights on this land and its waters—rights that were upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in March 1999.

In both 1837 treaties, Americans primarily were after the rich timber resources in the "triangle" of land between the two rivers. But the widely reported treaty signings also attracted the attention of land speculators and settlers."

**Tribes: Ojibwe (Chippewa)**

**Concluded at: Fort Snelling, St. Peter's (now the Minnesota River) (at the confluence of St Peter's and Mississippi rivers), in Wisconsin territory.**

**9/29/1837**

In 1837, the U.S. government persuaded a delegation of Mdewakanton Dakota to travel to Washington, D.C., under the pretext of settling their southern boundary. Instead, the Dakota were pressured into ceding all their lands east of the Mississippi. The land was valued at \$1,600,000, but the government agreed to pay far less.

**Tribes: Dakota (Sioux)**

**Concluded at: Washington, D. C.**

(Minnesota Treaties, 2008)

As the tour guide continued in her tour guide voice relating the horror of these events, I pushed back the tears that threatened to spill. The Governor's Reception Room was the last spot on the tour, and the tour guide left us to linger or to explore further other stops on the tour. With a few other visitors still left in the Governor's Reception Room, we went back to read the placards on the wall. An elderly gentleman beside me blurted out, "That is just horrible what we did! How could we have thought that was appropriate?"

The encounter in the Art Gallery in the Governor's Reception Hall in the Minnesota State Capitol was far from benign. The paintings and accompanying stories left an indelible mark on my soul. One of the classes I teach at the University of Winnipeg has an experiential learning opportunity (ELO) component to it, and that field trip was my ELO that I took back to my classroom. My previous classroom exercise of "That is completely and totally unfair" paled in gravity and was suddenly rendered inconsequential. What is a speeding ticket, a piece of paper, that binds me to a \$100 fine, compared to having your way of life and land taken away by words signed on a paper called a treaty?

Teaching and pedagogy are a fluid art form that have the possibility of taking on many different shapes. The gravity and long-lasting impact of words spoken or written on a page lead me to a humble recognition and a desire that my words and interactions may be gentle and kind. Words and occurrences that students remembered years later after an incident that they recalled as unfair, still lingered. Occurrences and words signed on a treaty over one hundred years ago still impact lives and livelihoods today.

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## References

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## About the Author

**Helen Lepp Friesen** teaches in the Rhetoric, Writing, and Communications department at The University of Winnipeg. Outstanding points in her career are meeting and having the privilege of working with hundreds of enthusiastic, talented students and working with colleagues that are supportive and encouraging. Her research and writing interests are multimodal writing in culturally-diverse classes. She enjoys outdoor activities such as skating, snow sculpting, biking, tennis, and running.