

Three Stories about Mike, or How to Advance a Play Ethic in Life over a Work Ethic

By Bob Henderson

As a physical educator in the mid-1980s, Mike came to my office with a proposition. Rather than write a research term paper with “X” number of sources properly referenced, a length of “X” number of words, and the correct formula-style structure, Mike wanted to use the “opportunity” to work out on paper a philosophy (a few ideas strung together) he’d been “wrestling” with (see Horwood and Raffan in this issue). The catch for me was he didn’t want to use any of the required hallmarks of university paper writing. Mike needed the freedom at the outset to go where he envisioned going with ideas on paper. I cannot remember whose idea it was — his or mine — but the deal was made, playfully, that he would write two papers. First, he would write his paper, his way. Then, once satisfied, he would write the paper according to the class requirement, with references, word count, and structure as specified, in a spirit of fairness to other students in the class. He only really cared about the first paper — his paper.¹

This wasn’t my only exceptional early moment with Mike. Among my first memories with Mike include me doodling on the guitar as a background sound at a campfire, or was it in the camp lodge? Yes, the lodge. Anyway, I started playing the tune of “Alice’s Restaurant” by Arlo Guthrie. Mike stopped where he was in the group conversation and got a bit closer to the guitar and started singing the chorus with me. Now, for those unfamiliar with Alice’s Restaurant, this is a talking rag-time/blues anti-war comedy song of 18 minutes length. Mike started in on the talking parts from the beginning and I joyfully caught on and continued to play to support him on the guitar (“ge-tar” as he often called it, I came to learn over time). Mike did the whole 18 minutes. If he missed something, I, for one, didn’t catch it. The energy of the room grew with each minute from the, “and they all moved away from me on the bench there” to

the final “You can get anything you want, at Alice’s Restaurant.” When he was done, the place exploded with celebratory delight. I had a deep calm satisfaction of having been part of something spontaneous and fleeting that I knew I would carry with me for a lifetime. That sudden impromptu playful performance of Alice was over 25 years ago. I have a faint recollection of stepping back from the immediate moment to wonder, “Who is this guy?”



Many months later, I knew much more about Mike (the warm/cold paper writing experience for one). Somehow in our interactions we had started a debate. What is the better water craft for travel in Canada? He maintained it was the kayak and I the canoe. We both secretly knew, I’m sure, it was a silly, but exceedingly fun, interaction. It was the playfulness of it that we liked as we kept it alive. It was the play that mattered. We’d pass in the school hallway and I would put my arms in canoe portaging position to remind him of the superiority of the canoe because of its ease of portaging. Mike would respond with a high brace and we’d share a pretend dirty-look. This went on for awhile with others involved until a challenge mounted and a crescendo moment ensued that was really accelerated playful mayhem.

The challenge was made that, each with a team of four, canoe-better or kayak-better folks would do the physical education student society ten kilometre fun run. You must picture this: that's portage our respective watercraft ten kilometres through campus and many a town sidewalk. He and I loved the playfulness but had we gone too far. Perhaps we both thought so. The police officer who was to marshal the race thought so and banned the boats from the event. As I remember it, the canoeists dispersed to run the race, but the kayak team ran together and waited for me so we might still celebrate together at the finish line. What fun! I remember catching a look of disdain from a senior professor colleague who had run the race with a fast time. Clearly, I had transgressed an unwritten law in professorial-student event interactions. This didn't matter; the play ethic had won the day.

There is hard work in all these stories. Mike wrote two papers. Somehow Mike learned an 18-minute lyric (Google "Alice's Restaurant" and start the learning process yourself). And Mike was prepared to (with others) carry a boat for ten kilometres. But it was not working that matters to these actions. It was play. Play can be hard work. Perhaps it should be hard work. I might have a "wrestle" with that. Play for Mike was a warm feeling, personally satisfying like that term paper and socially engaging like a performance of Alice amongst friends. Play matters in learning and pushes one passionately. That's what kept the canoe/kayak debate flourishing to an absurd but

playful conclusion.

For Mike the gem of life experience figured brilliantly. There is a play ethic to be had. Life lessons abound in revisiting these stories for me and for you, dear reader, who may have known Mike and now deeply miss him or who may not have known Mike and seek out professional insight and learning to advance your work in outdoor education and life. From Mike: it is wise to keep playfulness close. Thanks, Mike!

Endnotes

1. Mike's paper concerned warm versus cold experiences. Warm experiences involve full willing, passionate engagement in the task at hand. An example might be baking an evening bannock having tended the fire just right, with a kneaded dough ball just right, with fine ingredients well purchased. Once more, all are hungry from a good time spent. That bannock is essential now. It is warm in many ways. Cold is a quick rush, in and out, Big Mac, down the hatch with no involvement in the process. At the time he wrote the paper, Mike wanted people to have more warm experiences rather than cold ones. As I look back on it now, this paper was more Mike the philosopher than Mike the educator, though I sense he never made a distinction.

Bob Henderson and Mike Elrick were at McMaster University together in the mid-1980s influencing each other through countless small actions as happens with the best of teacher / student blurring.

June 9, 1999 — Day before the CELP closing ceremony — another year. The year of the amazing winter camp and the straw-bale shed. Honour the kids and let them honour you Mike and let life flow through you as the river flows without knowledge of where it goes — but has the deep sense that where it is going . . . must be the right path. Summer will be here soon. A time to kick back. Be a full time Papa — and soak up some lazy life.