

'Venture Course in the Humanities': My Thoughts and Feelings

By Steve Acevedo

Recently, I attended the graduation ceremony of the fourth class to complete the *Venture Course in the Humanities* program. It was a wonderful evening for a couple of reasons. One, having been a participant of the program myself, I could relate to the graduates and celebrate their achievement. The other, more pertinent reason for me, personally, was the opportunity to acknowledge people whom I have grown to love and respect. These are people who have made a huge impact on me; they've made an indelible impression that will influence my thoughts, decisions, and actions forever more. I'm referring directly to the professors who taught us in the program, and indirectly to the board members of the Utah Humanities Council – as well as those supporters who without their financial or spiritual and moral support the program could not exist.

My participation in this program has been one of the great experiences in my life. To expound on this, I'd like to shine some light on my life prior to my participation in *Venture Course*, and to my life currently.

In the Summer of 2000, beginning in August, and continuing to early December, my family was tested by five deaths. Included in these passings were my four-year-old daughter, Abriel, my Father, and my wife's sister. On September 17, of that year, a Sunday, I received a phone call from my wife, from whom I was separated. She told me that one of their cats, Ashley, had apparently drunk some spilled antifreeze from off of the driveway

and was very sick. She thought she might be dying and told me our three children were beside themselves crying over Ashley.

I went right over and found our three young children kneeling in the hallway with our daughter Anna holding Ashley in her arms. Her two younger brothers were, like Anna, looking to me for a miracle. One glance at Ashley and I realized she was going to die, and was probably taking her last breaths. What can a father tell his young children at a time like this? I told them that in case Abriel needed to go to Heaven, at least we would know that Ashley would be there to play with her. Their sister had been at Primary Children's Hospital for four weeks in critical condition and was growing worse, not better. Within minutes, Ashley did in fact die. Our three children started sobbing uncontrollably – they were disconsolate. I can't describe how helpless and gut-wrenching it was to watch my children in such pain and not be able to comfort them.

Six days later their sister, Abriel, died in their mother's arms. Once again, we relived the painful experience of saying good-bye to a loved one. I couldn't help but feel that Ashley's death in some way prepared my other three children for the passing away of their younger sister.

At her funeral, my Father, to whom we all respected and looked up to, was fine. Perhaps a bit weary and tired, but then he traveled quite a bit in his work. Two weeks later he was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, and seven weeks later he died. My Father was my hero, and in my relationship with him, I had pursued an illusion my entire life. That illusion was this: If I were to someday accomplish something great, or stand out in some magnificent way, then perhaps I would be worthy of his love and respect.

Unfortunately he died too soon – he died before I felt worthy. This was a devastating psychological blow for me.

At the time, I had worked for a decade as a book representative for a company that was a subsidiary of Reader's Digest. I was the #1 rep in my company four of the previous six years out of 300+ representatives and made a very comfortable living. Soon my life fell apart. I am a sensitive soul, and didn't handle the grief and sorrow as well as I would have liked. In a short period of time, I went from being the golden boy in the company to persona non grata. In sales, no one cares what you did yesterday; it's about what you do today. I lost my job, our home, and all of my possessions. I moved in with my mother – ouch! – and spiraled downward in my self-esteem and personal presence. Where I was once outgoing, confident, and affable, I became recluse, detached, and withered in spirit. To borrow a sports metaphor, I had lost my mojo.

Four years later I was still struggling to find myself. I still had not regained the vibrancy of spirit I once possessed. Then, one day while reading the *Salt Lake Tribune*, I came across an article about a new program sponsored by the Utah Humanities Council. It was called, *Venture Course in the Humanities*. It was an opportunity for non-traditional students to receive an education in the humanities, gratis. In the article, it indicated that the program was designed for people of modest means who had not attended college, or had few credits. They needed to be able to read a newspaper in English. Since I was reading the paper and had never attended college, I felt qualified for the program...if only my financial situation would not be a deterrent. I thrust my hands in my pockets and counted my life's savings – 63 cents. I felt confident I would qualify.

As I was reading the article, *my heart leapt for joy*. I *knew* that my life was about to take a turn for the better. Immediately after finishing it, I sat down at the computer and began composing my application letter. I was excited and hopeful, energized and awake, filled with awareness that this might be the match to light my pilot light once more. I knew in that moment that I would be part of the program, and that I would shine.

Some time later I was called and briefly interviewed over the phone, and then invited to come in for a face to face interview. I met a lady named Jean who not only worked for the Utah Humanities Council, but was also slated to teach one of the courses. I usually do well in interviews, and make a good impression, but for some reason I could tell that Jean was hesitant about me. I asked her if she felt I would be a good candidate for the program, and that's when I discovered the source of her uncertainty. Since I was wearing a nice suit and spoke well, she asked if I knew that the program was for adults of modest means, and who hadn't been to college. I had to chuckle and assure her that I was indeed poor. I asked if she'd like to walk downstairs and check out the junkyard reject I was driving. She took my word for it. I passed the interview and was accepted into the inaugural *Venture Course* program. I would later learn that Jean Cheney is one of the nicest people I would ever meet, and she became one of my heartiest supporters.

In August of 2005, at the new Salt Lake City Library, I met for the first time my fellow students and faculty for the program. This was going to be an adventure. Starting in September and continuing to April, I was immersed in an educational experience that awakened all of my curiosity, inquisitiveness, hunger, and passion for learning. To my delight, my classmates felt the same way I did. Upon meeting them for the first time at the

library, I harbored secret doubts about many of them. What I relearned for the umpteenth time is that you can't judge a book by its cover. On the whole, they were as dedicated and passionate as any group I had ever been affiliated with. They were searching for meaning in their lives, and their life experiences were as diverse, fascinating, and heartfelt as any group of people I knew.

The professors were unbelievable; their passion for teaching was contagious; their dedication inspiring. But mostly, aside from the actual subjects they taught, what came across the loudest was their hope and affection for us. They were as invested in our growth, development, and education as a mother lioness is in safeguarding her cubs. As much as we wanted for ourselves, we also were motivated by the desire not to let down our mentors. Their dedication cast a long shadow upon us. Personally, I felt that the continuation of the program to some degree rode upon the shoulders of this inaugural class's success.

I relished my time in the program. The dark mist of grief, sorrow, fear, and doubt began to evaporate in the warm glow of education. I found my wings, and left the cocoon. A transformation began; where I once was consumed by pain and doubt, hope and vitality soon flowed in. I discovered that what I had long suspected was true – I am brilliant, passionate, and articulate. I realized that I am a gift to any group I am a part of.

Four years later I am not the same man that read that article in the paper. I am happily married, enjoy a healthy, loving relationship with each of my children, and am living my dream. I am the incarnation of what education can mean to the common man. I

have been lifted to the heights of what I can become, and won't soon forget what there is to live, see, and be.

Two weeks ago my wife and I took the leap of faith to leave our menial jobs and live our lives more fully in pursuing our dreams. She is sculpting full-time, and I am promoting her and writing full-time. Within hours of finishing her first sculpture since our new commitment, we sold her first piece for \$4,000 and received a commission for a \$5,000-\$11,000 job.

What can you say to people who have made such an incredible difference in your life? How do I adequately convey the scope of appreciation and love I feel for each and every one of you? I feel like you have taken me as a lump of clay, and molded me into a 'David.' Whatever good I do in this world, your spirit and efforts are part of that success. I intend to pay it forward.

To each and every one who is a part of the success of *Venture Course in the Humanities*, thank you, thank you, and *thank you!* God bless you, and best wishes in your continued quest of education and the betterment of humankind.

Steve Acevedo

abrielsdad@comcast.net

801-427-5985

May 3, 2009 (my son's birthday)