

My Merger Melodrama at the University of California, Davis

Romain Oliver Nelsen

Abstract

This memoir recites a tale of personal travails involved in joining two dissimilar senior learning programs competing for members in the University of California, Davis to create an enduring OLLI. The task turned from mating reluctant mindsets into an established framework for the growth of beneficial intellectual entertainment. To date the twain are one and look to remain so.

On a pleasant Monday morning in May of 2005, while proceeding apace in my retirement, I was asked to help with a problem involving UC Davis senior learning programs. Why not? It seemed like the administrative analog of straightening up the classroom chairs. I agreed and unwittingly stepped into a drama. What happened to me was akin to the Fool falling through the on-stage trap door of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, down into the under workings, down there with old Hamlet's ghost. Since then and from that vantage, I howl up at the actors.

A bit overdone? Yes, of course, but after that encounter I've played at least two parts I didn't reckon on: first as mediator in consolidation of two lifelong learning programs at UC Davis; and then as director and stage-hand in the new OLLI production born of that union. This recount asks if the charge was worth the *strum und drang*. I'll stage my conceit as melodrama, perhaps even opera buffa. Here goes.

Act One

Pamela and I moved our cats and accumulations from Santa Monica to Davis, California, in April 1998. We wanted just such a place, a town built around a university. One of our daughters was a 1993 UC Davis Law School graduate. Her stay gave us a taste of this town that some call quirky,

not far from an off-ramp on I-80 between Sacramento and the San Francisco Bay, a place with a sign painted on a water tower. We liked this small “company town.” Still do, even in summer heat.

Our kids were through college or through with college. Three of the five children did or would live in northern California with grandchildren, giving us a usual family motive, with an escape back-story, ideal on several counts. I’d been a lawyer in private civil practice in southern California, principally involved in business-insurance coverage problems. The work was demanding and rewarding, although technical and obscure. My practice required considerable travel. I was 63 and might have held on longer, but my client’s corporate reorganization and a Willy Loman kind of burnout sapped me. I wanted some distance from the office while I wound down my last few cases. We’d staged an exit to Davis, knowing what I would do: go back to school.

I also knew what I would study for starters: the Bible and the Bard. Stephen Jay Gould remarked, “No one who has not read the Bible or the Bard can be considered educated in Western traditions...” (*Time* magazine, July 23, 1999. By that (or any) standard, I had much to learn and to that end, enrolled in courses along those lines through University Extension. It wasn’t entirely new. I’d sampled Biblical subjects in lectures at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles and had begun to delve into the ironic intrigues of English Bible translations. Religion and Shakespeare’s works were interests, but I lacked the free time to really dig in. Retirement made study both a joy and a transition. I took inactive status in the California Bar at year-end 1999 and became fully occupied in making up my neglected education. After three or four years and sixty credit hours, including graduate creative writing workshops, I drifted out of the classroom and meandered toward writing a memoir.

In the process, I began taking courses in Senior Learning Unlimited (SLU), a UC Davis-affiliated senior’s division offering learning at a slower pace with no exams, papers, or grades. In SLU, I was both student and teacher: a bit of Shakespeare; William Tyndale’s Bible translation; a Monday morning discussion called “Whither America.” All this was catch-up on the chances I’d wasted as a young man on the mid-American plain or missed when I stumbled into a chopped-off career as an airline pilot.

As a boy, I first lived on a small farm on the Iowa-South Dakota border. We moved to Sioux Falls at the start of World War II as a temporary airbase of tarpaper barracks was thrown together. Dad worked building the airbase and signed on as a fireman when it became operational. The family prospered with war but struggled with the post-war peace. Dad worked road construction. Mother, dad, two younger sisters, grandmother, and I lived stuffed together in a 28-foot short trailer, following the asphalt trail. After high school, I began at South Dakota State in 1953, but dropped in and out, wandering. In 1956, on a whim and jet noise, I enlisted in the

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South Dakota Air National Guard, where I was packed off to the active duty USAF to train as an aviation cadet. I was duly commissioned an officer and radar technician to fly shotgun as “back-seater” in an Air Force air defense interceptor called the F-89 Scorpion. Following that purgatorial stint, I bounced back to South Dakota to finish my Cold War service in the Air Guard. After another couple years at South Dakota State, I cycled back to the Air Force to become a fighter-interceptor pilot in the F-102 Delta Dagger, which we lovingly called the Deuce. Flying it was sensual delight, a labor of love. I did well. With a few years’ seasoning and as graduate of the advanced interceptor-pilot training program, I hoped for a flying career in the Air National Guard.

Changing times, along with marriage and a first baby, cast airline flying as a more stable occupation. In 1966, I took a pilot job with Continental Airlines in Los Angeles and transferred to the California Air Guard. Continental expanded with the War in Vietnam, putting me up for promotion to Captain by 1968. I flew both Boeing 707s and Deuces, enjoying the variety. We had three more kids and bought a GI Bill house in the Los Angeles suburbs. Things looked good.

But in 1969 Richard Nixon became President. Continental Airlines had provided airplanes with lovely flight attendants for John Kennedy to campaign against Nixon in 1960. Three days after taking office, the Nixon administration revoked and remanded Continental’s newly awarded international routes. That meant I would fly second-seat into a foreseeable future. Not bad as work goes, but, considering my ego not good either. So what to do?

A stint of jury duty then piqued my latent interest in lawyering. Southern California offered several night law school possibilities, feasible on an airline schedule but not with Air Guard duties. The newly forming Whittier Law School accepted me, and I cut short military flying at a bit more than 15 years, 9 in the Deuce. After 4 years of juggling flying and classes, I graduated and was sworn in at age 38 in 1974, becoming both lawyer and fellow-Whittier alumnus with then-resigning President Nixon.

A small Los Angeles insurance-defense law firm offered me a chance to try my hand at courtroom work. That experience was invaluable, but quickly convinced me that I’d rather fly airplanes than try cases for insurance companies. But I hedged. While retreating to Continental, I retained a small ownership in the law firm and continued part-time in a coverage-analysis specialty, with more writing and less courtroom work, which I do while flying a schedule.

When my airline seniority number came up for Captain in 1977, I took a post as a junior supervisory pilot on both the Boeing 727 and DC-10, while continuing part-time legal work. That arrangement lasted until 1981, when Continental became a take-over target in the deregulation fiasco. I held a tenuous position at Continental as assistant to the interim chief pilot.

Chaos dominated the corporate acquisition. Our CEO committed suicide in the executive office on August 9, 1981, after losing the hostile takeover. With that shot, my flying career flamed out. I continued at Continental until year's end and bailed out to my fallback, taking early retirement to salvage my pension.

The legal niche I'd developed blossomed with computer use. Insurance coverage questions became my ticket to ride around the country tending insurance disputes about who paid what and how much for business squabbles, mostly on intellectual property issues spawned by the information technology boom. I was busy and productive. By the year-end 1997, however, I'd had enough of travel and tension, and I began the retreat to Davis. Good move.

Act Two

The plot twist came on that May Day Monday in a "Whither America" class, when the late Bob Cooper, then SLU president, sat in. I'd met Bob, but he wasn't a regular. Why was he there? At the break, he put his hand on my shoulder, in passing, and asked if we could talk. "Of course," I said. Bob had flown a full combat tour over Europe as a B-17 pilot. But I admired Bob for more than his military service; he was a Davis community leader and a good guy.

Dorothy Reinke, the president-elect and co-founder of SLU, was at that first after-class meeting; she'd suggested me as candidate to check out a proposed merger with OLLI. They sketched the controversy; the Board was divided on a consolidation. "You were a lawyer," Bob said. "You might find this interesting." I was being drafted and I knew it, but I didn't resist. "Okay," I said. "Should be simple. Piece of cake. Why not?" A fool's question: I knew these could be sticky. I can't say that I wasn't warned and aware, but my overblown self-esteem and difficulty saying *no* overruled the caution light blinking on the instrument panel. Pamela reminded me that I hadn't retired to regress into the morass I'd just escaped. Gilbert and Sullivan, among others, noted that "things are seldom as they seem."

And they weren't. I agreed to chair an *ad hoc* committee. Over the next months, we garnered information and heard arguments, each with validity, some vociferously made. I'd been in SLU courses since 2003 and read OLLI course bulletins, but hadn't ventured into the UC Davis OLLI that had formed in 2002 while I was taking on-campus courses. I didn't have a position and had nothing at stake. Each had different operational concepts.

With contrasting formats, the two UC Davis senior learning programs co-existed uneasily in the Extension Department. SLU was low cost, entirely self-supported by volunteers and unpaid instructors, with space rented around Davis as it came. OLLI at UC Davis operated as a discounted part of the Extension programs, supported in part by an Osher Foundation

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grant, with Extension administration and paid instructors. Each was by membership, SLU had about 150 members and OLLI had nearly 100. The Osher Foundation required 300 members to continue the annual \$100,000 start-up grants. OLLI at UC Davis wasn't going to make the renewal.

UC Davis Extension didn't want to lose either the grant or the prestige that went with an organization such as OLLI. On the other side, SLU feared being overrun by OLLI procedural requirements. SLU could accept a conceptual consolidation, but wanted to stay with its successful SLU name and method. The Foundation funded OLLIs in colleges across the country with few limitations, but required a uniform brand on a single OLLI logo. Other requirements were favorably structured, allowing considerable latitude to individual operations. More than 100 OLLIs were already in progress under this formula. In essence, it came to the name, but not the content so long as program quality was high. The dean of UC Davis Extension, Dennis Pendleton, and his special assistant, Howard Schutz, gave me unfettered access to investigate and report.

Despite objections, I concluded the better choice was to merge and apply for OLLI status, while using the SLU management structure—in effect a reverse take-over—making the UC Davis OLLI over on the SLU model, which had been funded from a single source with some help from University Extension. The newly constituted OLLI would, however, be funded from three sources: the Osher grant, UC Davis Extension, and memberships and course fees. The SLU Board was wary, but agreed to try. With effort, the newly combined organization reached about 350 members by year end 2006.

Then the Foundation raised minimum membership to 500. That required further persuasion, first to the Board, then the membership at large, through modest course fee increases. The number of courses and events was expanded to accommodate growth. Annual membership fees were lowered for a recruitment period. The community responded, meeting the 500-member goal. The Osher Foundation extended the \$100,000 yearly grant to our newly modeled program. Our OLLI was endowed in 2007. My simple assignment had taken the better part of two years, with shifts and reversals, more time and emotional investment than I'd thought.

While this was underway, I'd moved from the *ad hoc* committee to chair of curriculum, on condition that the outgoing chair, Susan Hodgson, stay on to train me. She'd agreed and we proceeded with the help of a part-time employee. The workload increased. Christine Ficker, executive assistant to Dean Pendleton, met the challenge with verve. I became recruiter and utility player, sometimes more than a full-time job, heavy on typing and e-mail. Our OLLI had a fortunate upturn when Lorraine Townsend was hired as program coordinator. She'd been at UCLA Extension, although not at that OLLI. Lorraine gave us the essential element, and freed me to play a supporting role.

Our OLLI took an experimental-experiential approach with courses. We established relationships with the Davis Art Center and the Eleanor Roosevelt Circle senior co-op for course-room space, added basic audio-visual equipment to courses, offered film studies courses at the locally historic Varsity Theater and video recorded selected courses for broadcast on Davis Community Television and DVD distribution. Other works wait in the wings.

OLLI has been my preoccupation since Bob Cooper and Dorothy Reinke tapped me. My lifelong-learning plans hadn't included behind-the-scenes activity, including the financial acrobatics of the last years. Much Pamela and I had in mind when we first moved to Davis has been in a holding pattern. All this sounds like grouching. It is. Back to the question: was it worth it?

Yes. We've made friends. Members thank me. That's heady and rewarding, ample return. But I'd like to take a seat in the audience and scribble on the flying story memoir. Until I recommended the OLLI merger, I didn't have a personal stake in the production. Then, to further mix metaphors, fearing either a flop or a bad landing, it became *my* OLLI. Many others worked longer, harder, and better than I did, but since this is my melodrama, I can play hero or villain: Figaro or Dudley Do-Right, Count Almaviva or Snidely Whiplash. All of these have been my roles. And I'm invested in UC Davis OLLI and the entirety of OLLI, wherever it may provide intellectual entertainment for lifelong learning. Bravo Osher Foundation for all these second acts.

And, as it turns out, Juliet's take on a name was dead on. "That which we call a rose/By any other word would smell as sweet."

Romain Oliver Nelsen reflects on his happenstance tumble into roles as mediator between two senior learning groups and nurturer of the OLLI that emerged. He is an inactive California lawyer, retired Continental Airline pilot, and former Air Force and Air National Guard fighter-interceptor pilot. As a boy already burdened with an odd given name, someone discovered his middle name and mean kids took to calling him Ollie. He despised the nickname that he now relishes.

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