

# The Legacy of a Murder

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On January 13, 1907, my great-grandfather, David Muchmore, was murdered. He was shot by his neighbor in the midst of an argument over the boundary line between their two farms on Indian Hill near Cincinnati, Ohio (“Death end of land feud,” 1907). This family tragedy was witnessed by my grandfather, Wilbur, who was three years old. No doubt suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (Burman & Allen-Meares, 1994), Wilbur displayed a fierce temper when he was young, frequently erupting into fits of anger and rage. My grandmother used the word “volcanic” to describe his outbursts in her diary from the 1930’s. Over time, however, he somehow evolved into the happy, upbeat, and eternally optimistic grandfather that I knew in the latter part of his life. He died in 1989 when I was a 27-year-old middle school teacher.

Drawing upon the work of Chryst, McKay, and Lassonde (2012), who developed the concept of the “ghost teacher,” I have come to view my grandfather as a key component of my own ghost teacher. His personal story serves as a powerful influence that shapes, enhances, and sometimes challenges my view of good teaching. In explaining their definition of a ghost teacher, Chryst, McKay, and Lassonde state, “We carry in our relationship to and understanding of instruction and learning a narrative of that perfect-ideal teacher, perhaps the ONE who inspired us to teach, a composite of every “GOOD” teacher, or the antithesis of all the “BAD” teachers we had” (p. 30). Thus, a ghost teacher can be understood as the imaginary embodiment of a powerful yet invisible belief system that is virtually indistinguishable from a teacher’s individual’s personality and temperament. It is, in essence, their identity, which has been formed through a narrative of experience.

Identity theorists such as Rosenberg and Ochberg (1992), Randall (1995), and Brockmier & Carbaugh (2001) maintain that one’s identity is constructed through the self-formative power of narrative. “We make sense of the events of our lives to the degree we incorporate them into our own unfolding *novel*—as simultaneously its narrator, protagonist, and reader—making it up as we go, so to speak, even authoring ourselves into being” (Randall, 1995, p. 4). From this perspective, my grandfather’s personal history, as assimilated into my own evolving life story, is an integral part of my identity as a teacher educator, even though he was not a teacher himself.

Other self-study researchers have explored the autobiographical roots of their teacher education practices. For example, Allender and Allender (2006) discuss the evolution of their humanistic approach to teaching by connecting it to their own education as children.

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They both experienced school as being “restrictive, unresponsive, (and) oppressive” (p. 14), noting that their current humanistic philosophies of education had emerged from these childhood wounds. In addition to telling their own school stories, Allender and Allender also interviewed six other teachers about their past experiences in school—both good and bad—that had shaped their current approaches to teaching and learning. However, all of these autobiographical explorations focused primarily on their school experiences, as opposed to personal histories, family dynamics, or other influences beyond school.

In the *International Handbook of Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices*, Samaras, Hicks, and Berger (2004) describe the importance of engaging in self-study through personal history, claiming that it “provides a powerful mechanism for teachers to discern

how their lived lives impact their ability to teach or learn” (p. 905). Situated squarely within this form of self-study research with a strong focus on personal history, the purpose of my study is to explore the intergenerational reverberations of my great-father’s murder, as experienced by my grandfather, and how this tragic act of violence has impacted my thinking, demeanor, and identity as a teacher educator in a positive way.

In a previous self-study (Muchmore, 2017), I described my gradual shift from a traditional to a humanistic and student-centered pedagogy, attributing this change largely to the influences of A.S. Neill (1960) and other individuals whom I encountered in graduate school. In that article, I did not consider “why” I may have been predisposed toward accepting these influences, other than as a reaction to my own negative experiences in school. Like Allender and Allender (2006), I can describe much of my schooling as being restrictive, unresponsive, and oppressive, but I now believe that my openness to humanistic and student-centered teaching may be much more deeply rooted in my great-grandfather’s murder than in these childhood wounds.

## Method

This self-study involved the examination of a wide range of artifacts, which served as an important tool for self-reflection (Allender & Manke, 2004). To understand myself as a teacher and a teacher educator, I examined items such as past teacher evaluations, feedback from students, lesson plans, and various teaching reflections that I have written over the years. In examining these artifacts, I paid particular attention to the ways that I have enacted authority in my classroom, which I consider to be a key component of my pedagogy. To understand Wilbur’s life, I examined archival newspaper articles about the murder, my grandfather’s letters and personal papers, old audio recordings of my grandfather telling stories of his life, my grandmother’s diary between the years of 1934-1939, family photographs, and written notes of my own personal memories. The photographs, in particular, helped to re-animate faded memories in ways that I found to be emotive and compelling (Mitchell et al., 2019).

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I analyzed these data through a process of analytic induction as described by Bogdan and Biklen (2007). This means that I carefully studied all of the data and placed it into evolving thematic categories, which I continually revised and adjusted until all data had been accounted for. Some of these themes included manifestations of character traits such as humor, optimism, anger, generosity, etc., while others included epiphanic moments (Denzin, 2014) in both of our lives. Looking for connections between my grandfather's life and my approach to teacher education, I then crafted a narrative account of our shared lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). The use of narrative writing, instead of a more traditional academic form, has the advantage of evoking greater emotion, empathy, and personal connectedness among readers, which can stimulate a deeper and more thoughtful response (Cole & Knowles, 2001).

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of my analyses, I consulted with my sister who served as my critical friend (Schuck & Russell, 2005). Although she and I grew up together in the same household, our memories, our personalities, and our perspectives on our common experiences tend to be sharply divergent. We are also separated by time and distance, having lived on opposite ends of the country for the past 35 years and seldom seeing each other face-to-face during that time. Therefore, being simultaneously knowledgeable about our family dynamics, yet critically detached from my own lived experiences, my sister was uniquely positioned to challenge or affirm my interpretations.

### **Wilbur's legacy**

Many children who have witnessed the murder of a parent struggle in school (Malmquist, 1986), and Wilbur fit this pattern. After leaving school at the age of 14, he worked in a variety of low-paying jobs in order to help support his family (e.g., golf caddy, bowling pin setter, newspaper boy, etc.). What he lacked in formal education, he made up for with innate intelligence, a strong work ethic, and exceptional people skills. At the age of 21, he landed a job as a purchasing agent at a manufacturing company that made baby strollers where he worked for the next 47 years. He secured the raw materials for the factory to make the final products.

Based upon my own recollection, as well as that of my sister, Wilbur's general demeanor was one of happiness. He was almost always in a cheerful mood, and he was extremely gregarious. As a child in the 1960s, I remember him stopping at gas stations when they were still full-service, and he liked to get out of his car to engage with the men inside while the attendant was filling up the tank. Within a couple of minutes, the men would be treating my grandfather as an old friend, even though they were total strangers. He would typically say something funny or uplifting, which would instinctively draw people toward him. Today, more than 50 years later, I sometimes find myself emulating Wilbur by starting up friendly conversations with strangers, although I generally tend to be more shy and reserved than he in public settings.

I knew from an early age that Wilbur's father had been murdered, but I did not know any of

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the details. None of the adult eye-witnesses were still living by the time I was born, and Wilbur had but fleeting memories of his father. All I knew was that there had been an argument, that the neighbor had shot my great-grandfather who was unarmed, that Wilbur, his mother, and his three sisters had witnessed the shooting, and that the jury had failed to convict the killer. I also knew that the family had lost their farm, and that Wilbur had left school at the age of 14 in order to help support his mother and sisters. He did not have an easy path to adulthood.

Given his childhood trauma, Wilbur could have remained an angry and bitter person for his entire life, but he somehow found an inner peace through acceptance. It was as if he lived by the stoic maxim of Epictetus (1758): “Require not things to happen as you wish; but wish them to happen as they do happen; and you will go on well” (p. 440)—although I am certain that he never read Epictetus. Wilbur’s wife, Katherine, was no doubt a calming influence on him. A voracious reader of classic literature, philosophy, and theology, she was spiritual, thoughtful, and introspective. She did read Epictetus. She was also staunchly anti-violence and anti-war. Together, they had one child, Ronald, who was my father. Wilbur and Katherine were kind and nurturing parents who taught my father the principle of peace, which they also passed on to me.

Growing up, there was always an implicit understanding in my family that overt displays of anger and confrontation would inevitably lead to violence, and possibly death as evidenced by our family history. No one ever said this directly; it was conveyed through their actions. As a child, I never heard Wilbur speak negatively about another person, I never saw him argue with another person, and I never saw him act aggressively toward another person. My father was the same way. I remember attending a Cincinnati Reds baseball game with my father, mother, and sister in the late 1960s. I was perhaps five years old. After the game, as we were approaching our car in a dimly-lit parking lot, a large teenager suddenly emerged from the shadows and demanded five dollars from my father. “I watched your car,” the teen said, meaning that he wanted to be paid for guarding our car during the game and preventing it from being vandalized. Five dollars was a lot of money for my father, but he readily handed it over without argument. Afterwards, as we were beginning to drive away, my sister and I saw the same extortion being attempted on another man. “No, I will *not* give you five dollars,” the man shouted at the teen. “Get the hell away from me!” In our young minds, my sister and I assumed that this man had no doubt been killed for his belligerence after we had safely driven away. The lesson was clear; direct confrontations should always be avoided.

## Re-imagining my classroom authority

I have definitely internalized my family’s avoidance of aggression and confrontation in my teaching practices. As a beginning teacher in rural Kentucky, I had difficulty projecting myself as a leader in the classroom in the way that was expected. In my formal evaluations, my principal would note that I should try to be more commanding and assertive, or that I needed to make more eye contact with students. At the time, I considered these issues to be

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personal flaws or weaknesses that I needed to remediate, and I worked hard to change. All around me, the teachers in my school had very traditional approaches to classroom management. Their classrooms were teacher-centered, and they dealt with behavior problems head-on. If a student misbehaved, then they usually overpowered him or her through sheer intimidation—either by yelling threats or sending him or her to the principal's office. The principal was an opposing figure, very stern and authoritarian, and the students were deathly afraid of him. While I did become more outwardly assertive over time, engaging in overt acts of power or domination over others made me uncomfortable in a deeply visceral way that I did not understand.

Over time, I have come to realize that an important legacy of my great-grandfather's murder is my approach to authority in the classroom. Today, after 35 years of teaching, I still find it difficult to assert myself through traditional teacher behaviors, such as enforcing classroom rules, correcting student work, and using letter grades to motivate students.

Instead, I work hard to create relationships with students that are based on mutual respect, while assiduously avoiding interpersonal conflicts. For example, I often subconsciously use humor as a way to soften my authority. Once during one of my classes, I noticed that several students were texting during a class discussion. They were being discreet, but I still felt their behavior was inappropriate because they were focusing their attention on people outside the classroom while ignoring the people who were sitting next to them. However, instead of confronting them directly and saying something like "Please put away your cell phones," I instinctively chose a different approach. Quietly standing up, I walked to the white board and said, "If you are texting right now, then here is a message that I would like you to send." I then wrote the following: "I just got busted by my teacher. Gotta go!" Everyone laughed, including the ones who were texting, and they immediately put their phones away.

Most of my classroom humor is ephemeral rather than pre-planned—meaning that it emerges from the specific social context that exists at a particular moment with a particular group of students. It tends to involve word play, intertextuality, historical allusions, or the unexpected linking of two seemingly unrelated ideas. In another example, I had assigned the students to do an I-search paper, which is an alternative way of approaching the traditional research paper (Macrorie, 1988). I had asked the students to write a one-page proposal that listed their topic, their reason for choosing it, their proposed methods, and what they hoped to learn through their search. After reading all of these proposals and handing them back with written feedback, I had the students take turns telling the entire class about their proposals. Each student was supposed to take only 30-60 seconds.

One student was doing her paper on the role of the federal government in education policy, and I had written her a quite a few notes about the concept of "federalism," which holds that the governing powers of the federal government are explicitly enumerated in the

U.S. Constitution with all other powers residing in the states. I wrote that since the Constitution does not mention education or schools, the power to establish and regulate

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educational institutions should reside with the states, and not with the federal government. When it was this student's turn to tell about her topic, she shared my written comments with the class, which led to a lively discussion about America's historical wariness toward a strong federal government.

At one point, the student said that she felt the concept of federalism had evolved in such a way that the constitutional boundaries between state federal powers were now tilted more toward a strong central government. Sensing that this discussion was gaining steam, and being mindful of our limited time, I decided to bring it to a close. However, instead of directly asserting myself by saying, "Okay, let's move on," I made a joke. "You're absolutely right," I said, "If a state goes rogue, then the federal government will definitely assert its power. . . And, if 11 states go rogue, the federal government might even respond militarily." There was a brief pause, followed by laughter, as the students suddenly realized that I was referring to the American Civil War. In later reflecting on this incident, I realized that I was using humor as a way to manage the discussion without an overt display of authority.

Another way that I have softened my authority in the classroom is through my approach to providing feedback on student work. Inspired by Baumlin and Baumlin (1989), I abandoned the "forensic" approach to student writing in favor of providing "epideictic" and "deliberative" comments that celebrate the merits of their work and provide suggestions for improvement. According to the Baumlin's, forensic comments are accusatory in that they punitively identify all of the "crimes" or errors perpetrated by the paper. In contrast, comments from the epideictic mode are laudatory, and they celebrate the merits of the paper. Deliberative comments are neither accusatory nor laudatory; instead, they are persuasive in that they provide students with constructive suggestions for improvements.

As a young teacher educator, I would spend many hours poring over student work identifying all of their mistakes. I would then pepper their papers with my written corrections, often unwittingly obliterating their original voices and intent. Over time, however, I realized that not only was this practice ineffective in improving my students as writers, but it also simply did not feel right to me. Marking up a student's paper seemed too confrontational and authoritarian. Therefore, I began to experiment with alternative forms of feedback, such as providing many more epideictic comments and writing extended prose on separate sheets of paper. In fact, for a five-year period, I deliberately refrained from writing anything at all directly on my students' papers. Instead, I presented my feedback in the form of a personal letter to each student for each assignment. For example, in response to an assignment that I call the "Personal Educational History Paper" (see Griggs & Muchmore, 2014), I offered the following feedback to a student who had written an elaborate and heart-felt autobiography:

I appreciate your honesty and openness in sharing your story. You have done of good job of explaining and analyzing your education. Based on your nine chapters, it is easy to see how your life experiences have shaped your decision to be a teacher, and how these experiences will also influence the kind of teacher you will be. I was particularly moved by your story of Nicole, and also

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the stories of the many deaths you have faced in the past few years. Having lost my own father some time ago, I can sympathize with your experience. My only explanation for your teacher's lack of empathy is that she must have been a very unhappy person. I'm really sorry that happened to you. One constant theme that I can see throughout your story is the importance of the human dimension in teaching and in life. Teaching is all about human relationships and caring, and these are things that should guide the actions of teachers.

The students appreciated this kind of feedback, as evidenced by their end-of-course comments. However, with a three-course teaching load and 30 students per course, I found that the time needed to write a personal letter to each student for each assignment was unsustainable. Therefore, I now write on their papers again, but I tell them that they should consider my comments to be the first part of a conversation about their work, not the final word, and I encourage them to take ownership of their revisions. I find this collaborative approach to be an effective way to help to help students grow as writers while simultaneously blunting my classroom authority in a way that I find personally satisfying.

Finally, over the years, I have noticed that the power to assign grades creates an unspoken tension within the classroom which undergirds everything else that transpires. After thinking about this problem for several years, I eventually decided to raise the issue with my students. I began by dividing the students into five groups and assigning each group a letter grade—A, B, C, D, and F. I told them their job was to brainstorm a list of words that they associated with their group's letter. With these lists as our starting point, we then had a lengthy discussion about the role that letter grades had played in our own lives. For example, "What does an 'A' mean to you?" "What does a 'B' mean?" and so on. After the students had spent 10 or 15 minutes making their lists, I made five columns on the white board—one for each grade—and asked a representative from each group to write their list of words in the appropriate column. The whole class then studied the lists and looked for trends. For instance, the "A" column contained words such as "excellent," "outstanding," and "brilliant," while the "F" column was filled with words ranging from "failure," to "stupid," to "no good." The other columns contained words whose connotations completed this continuum.

With these lists as our starting point, we then had a lengthy discussion about the role that letter grades had played in our own lives. The students spoke about instances in which they felt their grades had not reflected what they had truly accomplished in a course, and they told how grades had sometimes actually acted as an impediment to their learning. Next, we discussed other possibilities for assessment, eventually deciding through a class vote that I would not grade any of their work. Instead, I would provide written feedback and allow them to revise until we both agreed their work was at an acceptable level. Although I would still have to assign letter grades for the overall course, the process of determining those letter grades was no longer authoritarian. Throughout the semester, I was amazed at the high quality of work that these students produced, and their engagement in class discussions was unlike anything I had seen in previous classes. In the end, I felt a deep

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sense of personal fulfillment in having successfully re-imagined my authority to assign grades.

### Conclusion

Teaching is an autobiographical endeavor. It is autobiographical in the sense that the values and beliefs that guide our actions are inevitably shaped by our personal histories. I began my teaching career being influenced by a ghost teacher without recognizing that influence. All I knew was that I always felt deeply uncomfortable whenever I asserted traditional forms of classroom authority, so I instinctively gravitated toward teaching strategies that were less confrontational and more humanistic. Early in my career, I viewed this trait as a weakness that I needed to overcome. Over time, however, by engaging in critical self-reflection through self-study, I have come to identify Wilbur as my “ghost teacher” who exerts a powerful influence on my teacher education practices through our shared family history.

Overall, this self-study shows how our family histories are inexorably linked to our teacher education practices. Past events can ripple across generations, shaping our values, beliefs, predilections, and behaviors in subtle and profound ways. In the case of his father’s murder, Wilbur’s resilience helped to transform a family tragedy into what I now perceive to be a positive influence on my own teacher education practices. Recently, at the end of one of my courses, a student sent me the following message: “There are several things that I have learned from you: always listen, always be respectful, and always be positive.” I immediately recognized that these were the same words that I could say to Wilbur.

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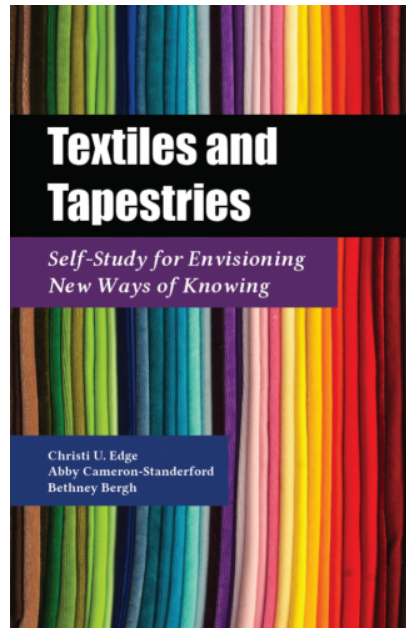
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### Suggested Citation

*Muchmore, J. (2020). The Legacy of a Murder. In C. Edge, A. Cameron-Standerford, & B. Bergh, Textiles and Tapestries: Self-Study for Envisioning New Ways of Knowing. EdTech Books. Retrieved from [https://edtechbooks.org/textiles\\_tapestries\\_self\\_study/chapter\\_109](https://edtechbooks.org/textiles_tapestries_self_study/chapter_109)*



Muchmore, J. (2020). The Legacy of a Murder. In C. Edge, A. Cameron-Standerford, & B. Bergh, *Textiles and Tapestries: Self-Study for Envisioning New Ways of Knowing*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from [https://edtechbooks.org/textiles\\_tapestries\\_self\\_study/chapter\\_109](https://edtechbooks.org/textiles_tapestries_self_study/chapter_109)



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