



What I Have Not Learned

Jonathan Michael Spector 

University of North Texas, the USA
Mike.Spector@unt.edu

Article Info

ABSTRACT

Article History

Received: 21/12/2024

This work is an invited short article in which the author shares his thoughts. In this context, the review process has not been implemented.

Keywords:

philosophy,
lifelong learning,
career.

As I approach retirement and reflect on nearly 80 years of life and over 50 years as an educator, I am struck by a humbling realization: the more I learn, the less I seem to know. Influenced by Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and its final proposition—"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent"—I have come to appreciate the limits of knowledge and the importance of humility in scholarship and life. My career, though unplanned, has taken me across diverse roles in philosophy, computer science, and instructional systems, yet the most profound lesson came not from academic achievements but from the realization that knowledge alone is insufficient without care for others. Echoing my professor's advice to think for oneself but live for others, I have grown to believe that the true purpose of education extends beyond skill acquisition; it lies in fostering compassion, intellectual humility, and meaningful contributions to humanity. I lament that I may have done too little to instill these ideals but hope that my students will surpass me in advancing lives centered on peace, service, and community. Ultimately, as my father once said, what remains is not what you say but what you do, and it is my earnest desire that education continues to inspire action toward the betterment of others.

Citation: Spector, J. M. (2024). What i have not learned. *Journal of Teacher Education and Lifelong Learning*, 6(2), 285-287. <http://doi.org/10.51535/tell.1602890>



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As I approach retirement and my 80th year wandering around this planet lost in space, I wonder what I have learned. I have been a teacher for more than 50 years so it seems natural to wonder if I have learned anything in all those years of teaching. I come to a conclusion that occurred to me in my studies as a doctoral student at the University of Texas in the 1970s: I am inclined to believe that I know less than I thought I knew. I was a new doctoral student without a master's degree in a top philosophy program among my fellow students most of whom had a master's degree in philosophy. At that point in my career I was unaware of a short book by an Austrian philosopher that would have a large impact on me. The book was entitled *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; the author was Ludwig Wittgenstein; it was the only book he published in his lifetime although he left behind a number of manuscripts on a variety of topics (1998; first published in 1992; see <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5740>). That short book contains 7 numbered statements all of which have sub-statements except for the last one, which was this: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent" (from the Gurenberg edition). If only politicians would learn that simply stated conclusion.

However, it was not a conclusion that pleased Wittgenstein. There was much he wanted to say that fell outside the boundaries created in the *Tractatus*. He wanted to understand why three of his four brothers committed suicide, for example. He wanted to understand why countries went to war and why he had to leave Austria and live abroad away from his homeland. How could his brilliant teacher, Bertrand Russell, and Russell's co-author, Alfred North Whitehead (1925-1926), make such a mistake or overstatement in *Principia Mathematica* concerning the relationship between pure and applied logic. Wittgenstein's critique resulted in an anti-foundationalist view of mathematics. Mathematics, in a sense, is a kind of language game understood by a community of mathematicians but has no provable relationship to the physical world we inhabit. Wittgenstein is not questioning the utility of mathematics, which is clearly well established. He is questioning its logical status. One might argue that one should accept a two-valued logic, which Wittgenstein elaborates in a footnote in the *Tractatus*, but accepting a two-valued logic does not rule out other logics, including multi-valued logics, which date back at least to Aristotle.

Why this early dive into logic and mathematics? I wanted to suggest that my ideas are provisional and subject to serious questioning. If one can question the foundations of mathematics and logic, then we ought to be somewhat more humble with regard to our own thoughts and beliefs. These initial words are aimed especially at those who blatantly ignore them – that is to say, politicians.

That last remark brought to mind many memories ... memories of how I have changed over the years. When I was much younger, say 60 years ago, I used to think a lot about adventures and things I wanted that made me feel good. Now I think I wasted most of my youth. As J. Alfred Prufrock said (in a poem by T. S. Eliot): "I should have been a pair of ragged claws, scuttling across the floors of silent seas ... Do I dare disturb the universe? ... I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled ..." (see <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/44212/the-love-song-of-j-alfred-prufrock>).

When I was a graduate student in philosophy at the University of Texas, one of my professors, Oets Kolk Bouwsma (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oets_Kolk_Bouwsma) told me to think for myself but think of others first. It has taken me almost 60 years to learn that lesson. My professors never tried to get me to adopt their thoughts or their way of thinking ... that seems so different from what my colleagues do and what so many students are experiencing these days. Perhaps my experiences are too limited. My memory is probably faulty. I remember my older brother, Daniel Earl Spector an historian, once told me when I was practicing a talk on Adolph Eichmann in junior high school (called middle schools these days). Danny said that the history of mankind could be told as the history of war. I thought he was crazy at the time. Now I think how sad that he was right.

Oh yes ... this was supposed to be about learning technologies and I was just focused on things I have learned so late in life. We go to school and university and learn many things. But when and where and how do we learn to live as decent human beings? Many professors want their students to think like them and continue the work they began. When I assess my own work as a professor, I think I have wanted my students to think and do meaningful work ... especially work for others and not to advance their own careers. I have failed.

When I think of my own career, I have to admit that it was unplanned and mostly coincidental. I first wanted to teach philosophy nine months a year and spend three months hiking and backpacking in the mountains. That never happened. I was the only one of my classmates to find a job teaching philosophy and it was at a community college. My job was later eliminated by cutbacks in funding under the Reagan administration. I then resorted to going back to programming having trained as a programmer previously when I worked for IBM. My brother, the historian, convinced me to move to Jacksonville State University to teach computer science, which I did. I tried to get the faculty there interested in software engineering but they were too wedded to their current courses, so I left for the Air Force Human Resources Laboratory in San Antonio where I became the senior scientist for instructional systems research. When the government's labs were being shut down, I went to the University of Bergen in Norway as the Director of Instructional Systems Research and managed to learn a bit about system dynamics.

From Norway, I returned to academia at Syracuse University and then Florida State University and then the University of Georgia and eventually to the University of North Texas. Once a Texan, always a Texan ... I think Willie Nelson might have said that (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Willie_Nelson).

Such has been my unplanned life of unplanned adventures and unplanned learning. In closing, I can only say that I have yet to learn how to be a peace loving, other directed, caring person. What remains is not way you say, as my father used to say ... what matters and what remains is what you do. I admit to having done too little and learned that lesson too late in life. My remaining desire is that a few of my students will do much more than I managed to do with regard to loving peace and caring for others. We do not live our lives alone and in isolation from others.

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