

# Thomas Anthony Burns: Autobiography

## Outline of a Privileged Life

2009

1) My birth in 1941 as a Caucasian Protestant in New Orleans, LA in the United States with its theoretical commitment to equality, and its boundless resources, open opportunities, and support for individual achievement was sure a nice opening move!

2) My birth to parents, Ed and Eloise, who were totally encouraging and supportive of any constructive effort on my part in any direction at any time was outstanding in determining both how I saw myself and where I could imagine myself going. My parents exemplified accomplishment so they did not need to exert pressure, just encourage me to get going! Amazing how patient they were before I took root.

3) My birth and rearing in a stable marriage and family greatly assisted my path toward success. Sure, there were the little disturbances, but nothing to threaten the integrity of the family pot. I needed both parents, and I got the full treatment, much to my benefit.

4) My birth into sustained upper middle class professional status – the social elite – was a spectacular privilege. My parents treasured education for their children, and I had no concerns at any time for my economic needs all the way through graduate school! I turned down fellowship opportunities because, unlike others, I was blessed with my “familyship!” And education was much more affordable at that time – the 1960’s.

5) Growing up from age 4 in the exclusive upper middle class suburb of Toledo, Ohio – Ottawa Hills – was equivalent to living a dream for most children of the world: total security in a clear sense of space and place; high expectations for success; professionally oriented education; and many athletic, educational and social opportunities in a small class environment. It would be hard to map a better situation, unless you want the “enrichment” of other groups and economic classes and the alternative life style choices they display, which can be broadening, confusing, or tragically disrupting – depending. Fortunately I learned early and subsequently throughout my career as a social scientist that while there are clear advantages to being “isolated” at the top of the heap, I had to appreciate that I was born on third base and compared to others really only hit a single to achieve success and “score” in life. I will never forget attending the college graduation party for a young Black woman from a struggling single parent, welfare household who was surrounded by an extended family in which no one had a high school diploma. And even her achievement was only a triple since she had a lot of encouragement from that same family to soar beyond

their limitations. It is so tempting to forget the distance to the bottom of the human ladder and to credit ourselves with hitting “home runs” while “floating” in luxury at the top and appeasing our underlying guilt by making charitable monetary contributions and keeping ourselves cloistered and unsoiled by personal and active involvement in assisting the less fortunate. Nothing like at least “being there” long enough to experience the miles others walk in their tattered shoes to keep real perspective and true appreciation alive. Starting out circumscribed by the extraordinary privilege of the Ottawa Hills life, it is so easy to lapse into complacency and the convenient assertions of, “That’s just how that kind of people are; trash will be trash.” It is this kind of mindset that makes the welfare mother the abuser of the system and not the victim of circumstance.

6) Close friends K through 12. I was never a loner, always on my bike cruising to locate the “action.” I always had a variety of good friends – from mucking about in the pond beyond Patneau’s on Manchester, to pulling smudge pots behind our bikes in the Fall, to breaking into the elementary school gym to shoot buckets, to crashing toboggans on the big hill in Ottawa Park, to escaping Rip at construction sites, to scratching out a rink on the creek for pick up hockey games – in our figure skates, to Rasmussen diagnosing my amplifier problem as I built the family’s first Hi-Fi system in J.R. Bogan’s electronics class, to big band dancing at Centennial, to “hard ball” golf at Par 3. No attachment challenges here! In addition, many of these friends remained an active part of my life into my 30’s as a result of frequent visits to my parents’ home – later in nearby Sylvania. And in recent years - especially via email, some of these core friends remain an active part of my electronically connected life today! Ottawa Hills friends are a privileged memory and an important pulse of continuity through my life.

7) Kids roamed free in my childhood from age 6 promoting independence and encouraging exploration and self-reliance. No adult smothering and toting and supervising! I was most often gone from home all day as a youngster, and often forgot to call at lunchtime to let the home front know where I was. The prevailing fear that seems to drive so much parental over-involvement today was not present for me. I benefited in my time from required respect for parents, nominal input from or involvement in media, regular family dinners, a culture of adolescence that had not become so separatist and protest in orientation, and alcohol as the only drug – accessible in 3.2 beer at age 16, with a minimally doctored draft card! More secure times – a HUGE privilege!

8) Age 9 and the family summer vacation to Nine Quarter Circle Ranch in Montana was an eye opener: I spent all my time with the ranch hands until I totally identified with country music, cowboy dress, and “twang” speech, to the point when coming home on the airplane in my western outfit I felt the increasing pressure of reentry into mid-western life where my presentation of self was no longer acceptable or appropriate – self out of place. I early on

experienced first hand the cultural conversion experience of “going native” – very valuable for a future social scientist.

9) From age 10, I had regular access to the 2,000 acre family farm in Missouri, 50 miles west of St. Louis. There I learned the value of extended family and real people working the land – waiting for rain, the integrity and cooperation of neighbors in a small rural community, the wonder of the oak woods, and the threat of hiding copperheads. And I grew to appreciate swinging an axe properly and the protective value of calluses. I learned early to feel comfortable in and to develop a deep attachment for a very non-Ottawa Hills social and physical environment – the beginning of a fascination with alternative ecological settings and life styles and of learning how to operate respectfully within them without losing one’s identity.

10) Age 11, Leaning on Lena: Lena came with the family to Toledo from New Orleans when I was 3 years old. Lena was with the family for 16 years in the role of a domestic. But Lena never fit the billing and was always much more than a “maid.” Lena was a second mother to me, always expecting at least as much from me as my parents, and always entrusted with my care far beyond the responsibility of any domestic. She was at my side during my most serious childhood illness – scarlatina, when my parents were cruising about the eastern shore of South America. I was one sick puppy, and Lena was THE ONE with me – day and night while I attempted to turn myself inside out in all night dry vomiting episodes. Lena was a class act as a fully competent human being – who happened to be Black, and she laid the lie during my entire upbringing to my father’s racial prejudice. Lena’s holiness songs must have been at my back when for years in the turbulent 70’s I was traipsing around the Black community of the inner city at night doing field research. Lena was later an activist in the civil rights movement in Toledo, and I largely attribute my ease in operating in the Black community to my fundamental comfort level with Lena – for sure a real privilege to have had her in my life.

11) Junior and Senior Years at OHHS: After most of elementary school and reading very poorly, I had to get serious about acquiring the reading skill and applying myself academically. My family gave me the time and encouragement to do this, and my SAT scores soared. Karen was my first love, and in that relationship I learned how it felt to dwell in the zone of commitment and majestic connection, and from mistakes that I made I learned the importance of being responsible and communicating respectfully. It was a treasured privilege to discover early what constituted the “baseline” for love, a key point of reference for assessing all that would follow.

12) What a terrific privilege it was to go to a top-notch private college – Carleton. Although socially repressed, academically Carleton demanded excellence and encouraged focused commitment. New Criticism in my English major allowed for independent critical thinking – self-reliance, what do YOU

think, not reciting what the “experts” think. No right answers, just interpretation that you could defend with the facts as you discovered and presented them. This was the beginning of thinking critically and expansively, even if, ironically, it was Art that was the subject! Carleton was my jump-start in the maturing of the intellect.

13) Discovering Inger early in my senior year at Carleton: We were together 24 solid hours on our second date and were very reluctant to part – that was the concentrated exposure test, which virtually all failed before Inger. The rest is a lifetime love affair and absolutely the best thing that ever happened for me. Quality relationships are all there really is of value in life. The significance of power, fame, and wealth pale by comparison, and among relations, nothing beats a great marriage, including children and professional accolades, which come and go. All before Inger was preparation, and all following has been in its shadow. Way beyond privilege, finding Inger has to have been pure luck, and I won the most important lottery of them all. Inger is the other side of life – the emotive and intuitive in its unfettered, uncomplicated form, and it is with Inger that my adventure began into really appreciating this other side of self, experience and life. From my intellectual perch, I am still reaching for what she has – naturally.

14) English Literature Masters at Indiana University: The challenge of converting complex thought to writing, the uncomfortable confinement of studying and being responsible to scholastic history and the views of the experts. This was the beginning of appreciating the need to contextualize my independent thought and learn scholastic responsibility. I still resist this; but I can do the bibliographic thing in the extreme, if I have to. As I moved to graduate study in the humanities, there never arose any pragmatic questions from my parents about how I was going to “earn a living,” just continuous support in all ways. I cannot count how many unhappy students I have encountered during my academic career who had the pursuit of their core interest squashed by “pragmatic” parents. I will never forget the brilliant but sad 3.8 GPA Marketing major in Wharton whose parents would not support her passion for modern dance. She was tragically headed for New York City with a great job for which she had no enthusiasm.

15) Teaching English Literature at Central Missouri State College: At age 25, this was the first time out on my own after marrying Inger. Teaching composition helped me penetrate the writing process and achieve needed simplification, if not brevity! Mostly I learned the contribution the writing process makes to the mastery of complex thought and the need for revision, revision, revision to achieve clarity. In teaching, I fought regurgitation and encouraged and rewarded creative and logical thought, to the delight of some and the dismay of others. And I discovered the range of talent and preparedness among the students at state colleges – from brilliant locals who could qualify for

any Ivy League school to strictly remedial candidates. And I encountered many students who were invited to fail because colleges refused to offer remedial training in basic skills. In working with students to identify their own topics for their compositions, I was impressed with the richness of each student's personal experience – this was the beginning of breaking the academic book and library mold and of discovering the value of the case study and of life history interviewing. And in teaching, I learned the difference between preparing for class as the teacher and preparing as a student. I vowed to give myself the time to prepare thereafter as if I was going to teach the class, whether I was a teacher or a student! Wow, did that make a difference when I returned for the final degree – a lot of power packed class discussions, often one on one with the instructor!

16) The Doctorate: Folklore at Indiana University was the best way for me to get to cultural anthropology from a background in literature. The eclectic theoretical bent of a young discipline allowed for utilizing any theory or method within the humanities or social sciences – huge latitude for exploring and thinking Large. Personality theory and artistic expression vied with the grammatical competence of artistic performance as I approached my dissertation, and personality theory won out. Collecting life histories revealed the rich tapestry of individual experience and the complex of effects this experience has on different basic temperaments. Life history and psychological theory started the process of tapping into the “soft” side of understanding human behavior and competence – the emotive and the unconscious. Clearly, intellect was not the whole story! This “soft” side would get greatly expanded, but it got a significant lift here for the rationalist and positivist I had become. Throughout it all, my family made it possible for my only concern to be academic success – no other work or long range financial debt to be repaid – Privilege! [Imagine at that time a full semester, in-state graduate course load at IU for a total of \$265 tuition and all fees!]

17) 20 years teaching in the Ivy League at the University of Pennsylvania: After losing out to affirmative action on two academic teaching positions, I landed THE plum appointment – from completing my Ph.D. at IU directly to a job teaching Folklore graduate students in an all Ph.D. program at Penn – the first semester teaching a 700 level seminar in theory! I got the equivalent of at least three additional Ph.D.s teaching 15 different courses in my first 5 years at Penn. That was hectic and the beginning of a lifetime of hair loss – trying to catch up with my Dad, but it was explosively expanding professionally, especially for one interested in the big scheme of cultural issues. Adequately representing the significance of psychological theory for understanding traditional art took me from personality theory, to developmental psychology, to evolutionary psychology, and then to parapsychology – with necessary excursions into cosmology, theoretical physics, comparative religion, creativity,

and mysticism. The value and importance of the “soft” side of the human being loomed large in this overall setting, and it became necessary to recognize the Intuitive as a basic human mental function – the soft side EQUAL of the hard side Intellect. In the privileged academic setting of Penn, I traveled a very long way in a very short time in understanding the intuitive basis of the artistic and religious experiences. As it turned out, all this exploration in behalf of teaching was a set up for my subsequent ten years of work in a Black church community attempting to understand a Pentecostal Deliverance church. Fortuitously, the church I was privileged to study and that ended up adopting me proved to be an extraordinary find. Both the pastor and the assistant pastor were completely aware intellectually of what they were doing in drawing on the literal belief of their members to arouse and develop the members’ intuitive competence so these members could enlist this competence to practical effect in improving their lives. There was a total match between the theory I was evolving about human capability and competence and the central ideas that were guiding the church leadership – no need to “impose” theory in the interpretation of this community at all!! This is the ideal field experience – the “natives” possess the theory to explicate their own symbolic behavior. Again, what an incredible professional privilege.

18) Children: As ill prepared and isolated as couples tend to be in this culture regarding child rearing, we nevertheless glibly reproduce, and it is a wonder kids survive their parents’ well intentioned ignorance. We got lucky. My daughter, Kia, is an expansive thinker like her father, poor soul. In fact, during her senior year in high school, Kia attended a set of worldview presentations that I gave in a course at Rutgers, subsequently wrote a senior thesis relating the gist of it, and has been pursuing the holism that was suggested by it ever since in her combined field of family and nutritional counseling. Kia has had the same quizzical response from her field that I got from mine – the curse of those whose ideas span established paradigms and challenge major cultural assumptions. Most importantly, Kia is a whole, quality person who, as a social service professional in Ashland, Oregon, knows the weaknesses of her surrounding culture and knows how to navigate around consumerism and all the cheap, subsidized, highly processed corn and soy products that are making us and the animals we eat sick and fat. My son, Derek, navigates away from consumption and as a home renovator in Portland, Oregon buys most of what he needs at the recycle store in his neighborhood. Anything that takes him either into the wilds of the West or into the contemporary music scene in Portland is his passion. Normal, adventuresome, and enlightened kids, what a privilege! No grandchildren – by default and choice respectively! Hey, there are already far too many of us humans on the planet, and for sure the gene pool already has all the elements that the Burns line has to offer.

19) Oregon for 20 years – the final phase: Even teaching and researching in a field-oriented discipline is cloistered. So, after 20 years at Penn and children who had journeyed West, Inger and I moved to the Upper Klamath Lake area of south central Oregon in 1991. With resources that came to us after the deaths of my parents, we bought a dilapidated 100-acre irrigated farm and began a native plant oriented nursery while we cleaned up and improved the property. Wetland restoration, aquaculture, comprehensive tree and shrub planting, and renovation of three old structures and the building of three new additions finally came to a close in 2008. What a privilege it has been to live in such a beautiful, varied and available natural landscape among close friends who appreciate the majesty of that space and who take responsibility for its care as well as that of the people who live in it.

Throughout our time in Oregon, Inger and I have been involved in watershed and ecological planning and education as well as community improvement projects in our area, still 35% native American. When we sold our part of the Missouri farm in 1998, I didn't believe the high flying stock market could possibly hold up, so we entered into a real estate exchange and purchased land in the Klamath Falls area and began a 59 unit residential development. We got out in 2000 with our resources intact while the market had gone bananas! Of course, we then invested in the stock market in 2000 – 02 to enjoy the final surge before the 07 crash and have just retrieved our investment as of a couple of months ago in what now [2009] passes for a "recovery." Nice timing, but thank goodness for the privilege of family resources to continue to make life tolerable for us dim-witted academic and social service professionals.

Apart from building and real estate investment and development, my pursuits in Oregon have been those of an applied social scientist – concerned with the practical relationships between the water limited ecology of the inland West, meeting our commitments to native people, and accommodating responsible socio-economic development. Fascinating and infuriating. We Americans are oriented to short-term gains and are really poor at large scale, long term planning. This in the face of all the challenges of climate change which require exactly these abilities – in spades. There may well be only one more generation during which the constantly expanding economic model [new since the industrial revolution] will hold up. If we do not prepare for an alternative before that system collapses [think multiples of the Great Depression], our children and grandchildren may come to view the survival skills of the Klamath and Modoc Indians who remain around me with the utmost admiration.

20) What a privilege to have lived a life at a time when my awareness of human potential has expanded at a rate equal to the expanding knowledge of our essentially infinite surrounding universe, and in this context to be able to

contemplate and debate the alternative futures for our species. This is BIG picture stuff, and I thrive on it – sometimes immersed in the virtually limitless possibilities for humans as they reach the point of determining their own biological and social evolution and other times impressed with the totally myopic and self-serving behavior of humans – even of those in “advanced” societies – as they conduct their everyday affairs. The future for the human species will emerge out of the dynamic interchange between the visionaries and the spin masters of greed, if we can afford the time outs to indulge our devotion to the myopic before we so alter our biosphere that we can no longer survive in a civilized state.

21) Majority - finally!! After the dust settled following my 2003 major heart attack [not a privilege!], I decided it was time to stop living as if the infinite lay before me. It was time to complete the unfinished business of my professional research and writing, which I had set aside in favor of practical and applied pursuits since coming to Oregon. In what passes for “retirement,” I have continued to be involved in ecological and community planning and improvement, but in the last six years [through 2010], I have carved out time to complete four works which reflect my professional interest in human intuitive development and how it can fit productively into the cultural dynamic of western culture. Dynamic Humanism: Balancing Complementary Human Perspectives and Mental Faculties; Science and Spirituality, Intellect and Intuition [2007] is an overview presentation of this proposal. A Little Bit of Heaven Here: The Challenge of the Deliverance Faith Within Urban Black Culture and Mainstream American Culture [2010] is a study, centered on six life testimonies, of the applied intuitive basis of the belief system of a Christian evangelical Black church community. The I Within Me: The Life History and Intuitive Development of a Psychic Healer [2010] is a detailed look at the way one person emerges into intuitive competence and application in a culture [American] where such competence is neither understood nor supported. Selected Short Writings of Thomas A. Burns [2010] contains a number of essays written on American Culture topics in the time since coming to Oregon that relate to my concern with the spiritual perspective and the development and utilization of intuitive competence. This present biographical statement, along with some poetry and a complete bibliography of my works are also part of that volume. All four of these works are now available on my website for free electronic download: [www.dynamic-humanism.com](http://www.dynamic-humanism.com)

Following this academic “cleanup,” my plan is to focus my remaining time and creative energy in a related but very different direction: sculpture. In the mid 1980’s I spent three years at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and completed all the course work for a major in metal smithing. The experience matured into a senior project, which utilized stainless steel cable of different sizes to create jewelry and sculpture. I have prepared the way for a return to

sculpting with this material by investing in reels of stainless cable, and the target is to depart headwork and writing and devote myself to large scale sculpting. As I view my life, being able to engage this “new” interest [aroused earlier] would really round out the privileged life I have led. As a child, my world was all visual and kinetic with the “word” in repose. Having spent my adult life exploring what the word has to offer me, I can return to my foundation, and if I am fortunate enough to have Inger, our friends, and my spectacular Oregon at my side, I can replace the play of childhood with the pursuit of art and BE the artist that someone ELSE can abuse in words. The sculpting adventure is the privilege before me.

To be alive is to change, and death is the only event that I can really see ahead of me that fulfills my idea of “retirement.” I do not believe in the slow decline by inches into death. In Oregon I can be sure that is not my future, and that can be my final privilege!

Of course, there is the other side of my story – all the qualifiers and a few real negatives. But in spite of the accumulating chronic physical annoyances as I reach for 70, no question, mine has been decisively a privileged life. If standard notions of reincarnation are real, I hate to think, on balance, what may be warranted on the return trip. I better apply for early admission to another galaxy, or maybe some other “verse” in the multiverse! It has been SOOOOO GOOOOOOD here!!