

# Honor-ing Parenthood

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**Abstract:** As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the author reflects on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

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As I write this essay, I am a few weeks from turning sixty. The sudden appearance of this moment on my horizon has taken me by surprise, to say the least. I ask myself where all that time went, oscillating between disbelief that I'm neither that younger version of myself that lives on in my imagination nor the version of myself that I'd dreamed I might become. The round number provides an opportunity to hit "pause," to grapple with how *here* came from *there*, to assess where some forks in the road happened, the influences that impacted who I became.

One of those forks arrived spring semester 1983. Chosen to participate in the Puerto Rico Honors Semester, I found myself living on a dormitory floor in Río Piedras with around three dozen students—a mixture of mainlanders from honors programs around the country and local students from honors at the University of Puerto Rico. That semester had its "complexities," perhaps a euphemism for difficulties, though of the sort that need not always be considered pejorative. For reasons of program design, classes were taught in English, which made it possible for students like me (with no Spanish language) to attend but, quite appropriately, was not well-received by UPR students unhappy studying their rich cultural and political history in a colonial language.

Nonetheless, *together* we travelled to nearly every quarter of the island, not on an exercise of “sightseeing” or “tourism” but on experiential forays. I use the word “foray” here quite intentionally, sharing as it does a French root connecting it to the word “forage.” Those adventures were our guided but collective expeditions for a food of understanding. Observations that began through individual eyes were tested, enlarged, and refined through our engagement with each other, not only in the classroom but, quite often, in spirited discussions that lasted well into the night.

Much less than any specific text we encountered or in-class presentation, I remember how excited and engaged I felt about that Honors Semester. A few months later, a group of us had a mini-reunion at that year’s NCHC Conference in Philadelphia. There, as part of the programming on offer, I attended one of the City as Text™ exercises, glimpsing in the process some of the magic that made my semester in Puerto Rico come alive. Hooked, I repeated the Honors Semester experience the next year at Long Island University in Brooklyn.

So, a few years later, relocating to London with two, then three, young kids in tow, it seemed a given to parent using the methods that inspired me. Together, we dove headlong into explorations aimed at reading the “text” of the city that was our new home. On school holidays and over summer vacations, we organized itineraries around threads that co-mingled history, art, music, and literature. An hour of sketching J. M. W. Turner’s “Fighting Temeraire” at the National Gallery led us outside to Trafalgar Square and a gaze at Nelson’s Column before heading to see Nelson’s grave in the crypt at St. Paul’s. We visited the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, hunting down artifacts that gave a context for the sailors who comprised the crews of ships like HMS Temeraire, took a walk along the Thames imagining an earlier time, then headed home on the Underground, spending some of our ride discussing how to fit together the pieces of the elaborate puzzle we were creating collectively.

If anything, what my honors experience provided was a belief that learning is best done *collaboratively* and *in place*. My children, as with my colleagues in my honors semesters in Puerto Rico and Brooklyn, arrived at these moments together at different ages, with varying interests and talents. Bit by bit, with this project and others, we mapped the layers of London’s complicated cityscape, guided by questions more than answers, appreciating the unique perspective that each could contribute.

But we also experienced the power of situated learning—treating “home” with the fresh and inquisitive eyes of an explorer. Like Michel de Certeau, we came to see that “Space is a practiced place.” The raw material of geography, with its empty shells of buildings and its vacant arteries of boulevards, became transformed through inquiry into lived *spaces* with specific histories, patterns of interaction, and *senses of being*. The process of excavating those spaces . . . well, it offered fun for them and me.

A philosopher no less than John Lennon reminded us that “Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans.” At sixty, I find myself less focused on what those plans *were* than what my life *is*. Time and again, I return to Honors Semesters, now nearly forty years ago, grateful to have a set of tools that continue to help me excavate the world around me *and* to have passed them along.

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