

The Dragon Wall

Several accounts have been written about how the dragons in the stairwell were designed and painted . This is my memory of how they came to be at all.

To my mind, the sequence of events begins with the death of Donald Heard. Don was a powerful painter and a first-rate teacher. We-the-deans had recruited him for the first-year faculty from Shoreline Community College. Like many of his colleagues, Don started working hard at Evergreen in the summer of 1971, even though his salary did not begin until September 15. He was -- enthusiastically -- accepted into the faculty team of the "Space, Time, and Form" program. Byron Youtz (physicist) was the coordinator, working with Sid White (art), Beryl Crowe (political science & humanities), and Lee Anderson (energy systems and inventive scrounging -- one of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters). Because I was serving as their Dean of Group, I sat in on some of their planning sessions in August and was impressed by the ideas for creative projects which Don Heard contributed. When the College opened off campus on October 4, Byron, Sid, Beryl, Lee, and Don took their 100+ students for a two-week retreat to a YMCA camp on Spirit Lake, just below the still-conical and beautiful Mount St. Helens. It was an exciting way to begin interdisciplinary teamwork.

On October 18, all of us were finally able to move into the Library Building. There was still work for the contractor's crew to finish, but the faculty and staff members could occupy their offices. Seminar meetings, whole-program meetings in lounge areas, use of the library collections, and activities in the computer and media centers could begin. The Evergreen State College was in business.

One bit of business in the middle of the week was taking me to the Metropolitan Development Council of Tacoma, to organize a cluster of part-time learning contracts. I stopped by my office shortly after 8 AM, and then set off down Overhulse Road. But down at the intersection with Mud Bay Road, there were flashing lights and the sounds of the sirens of emergency vehicles. There had been some sort of major accident, and the road was blocked. I had to get to Tacoma, so I turned onto 11th Avenue, drove east to Kaiser Road and south to Mud Bay Road -- the old Route 101 -- and then went through downtown Olympia to Interstate 5.

When I arrived at MDC in Tacoma, my contact person told me that she had received a telephone call which sounded urgent from my secretary and that I was to return the call at once. My secretary told me that there had been a serious collision at the intersection of Mud Bay and Overhulse -- the reason for the flashing lights and sirens. Don Heard had been killed.

As the police investigated the accident, we learned what must have happened. Don was on his way to the campus from his new home on Delphi Road, driving the retired small U.S. Postal van

which he had bought to transport the large canvases that he was painting in this period of his career. He had turned right onto Mud Bay Road and meant to turn left onto Overhulse. There had been rain overnight, and the road-surface was slippery and glistening in the bright sunlight which shone directly down Mud Bay Road from the east. Partly blinded by the sunshine, Don had started his left turn and was not aware of the lumber truck barreling west toward him. The driver was traveling empty and was eager to get up the Olympic Peninsula to the cutting site to pick up a payload. He saw the white van turning in front of him but did not have time to brake on the slippery surface. The Postal van had no seatbelts, air bags, or any other kind of protection. Don had been killed instantly.

In the midst of the exhilaration of opening a new campus and the flurry of activity as our hopes began to take shape, the darkness came upon those of us who had already worked with Don and now witnessed the pain of his family at this loss. Choose your figure of speech: feeling the cold breath of awareness of your mortality on the nape of your neck -- atavistic fear that this death was some kind of omen -- at the very least being on edge, very much on edge, until the grief and shock would slowly wear off.

About a week later, in mid-morning, I was standing on the Plaza directly in front of the main doors of the Library Building, chatting with Rod Marrom, the Chief of College Police. Faculty member Cruz Esquivel came by on his way to the Man & Art program area on the first floor. He waved to us and called, "Hi," as he started down the broad outside staircase. The handrails meant for the sides and center of the staircase had not yet been installed, though the sockets for the vertical supports were already there. It had been raining off and on for several days, and the portico where the third-floor roof projected over the staircase had been leaking. The stairs were wet and slippery. Cruz was wearing cowboy boots with high and hard heels. After he had taken a few steps downward, his feet went out from under him. He fell backwards, hitting his head on the edge of a step above him. He was knocked unconscious.

When Rod and I got to him, he was breathing but otherwise motionless. After what had happened to Don Heard just a week before, all I could think was "No! Not again!" Rod was carrying, in those days before cell phones, a walkie-talkie and immediately put a call in to the EMT squad housed in the fire station on Mud Bay Road. It took only about 10 minutes for the EMT truck, with siren sounding and lights flashing, to pull up in front of the Library Building. The medics lifted Cruz onto a gurney, strapped him down, wheeled him into their truck, and left for the hospital.

Rod and I agreed on the spot that the stairs needed to be closed off. The contractor's men had left two wooden extension-ladders lying against the outer wall of the first story. With the help of several onlookers, and using a great deal of caution to negotiate the wet stairs, we wrestled one ladder to block off the stairs from the Plaza and the other to block them off at the

first-floor level. While Rod stood guard, I went back to my first floor office, took a sheet of typing paper, and wrote with a thick marking pen: "**DANGER! Do not use stairs until guard-rails are installed!**" Then I made three Xerox copies, picked up a stapler and a tape-dispenser, and rejoined Rod so that he and I could affix the warning signs to the ladders.

We did not consult our respective vice presidents, nor did we form a disappearing task force. Somebody needed to do something fast, so we simply closed off the stairs on our own. It turned out that Cruz had suffered only a mild concussion, and he was back on campus a few days later. But the ladders and the warning signs remained. Whether nobody stopped to think about who had presumed to block the access, or whether people assumed that this was some order by the contractor involving insurance, for the next five or six weeks before the handrails were installed, no one used the outside stairs. Because the elevators were not yet working – and would not be working until just before Christmas – the only reasonable access that students, staff, and faculty members had to the first floor of the main wing of the Library was provided by the rather drab, narrow, utilitarian stairwell next to the elevators. So the student-and-faculty teams of "Space, Time & Form," "Contemporary American Minorities," and "Man & Art," as well as the denizens of the Academic Deans' Office and some Library media staff, got used to marching up and down in this less-than-inspiring space.

The members of the "Man & Art" team were eventually inspired to do something about the institutional drabness of the stairwell. From the very beginning, the team, led by faculty members José Arguelles, Don Chan, and Cruz Esquivel, had taken the initiative to get things started. Using the program as a nucleus of musical talent, Don Chan organized the Evergreen Jazz Ensemble and the Evergreen Chamber Singers and had these groups ready to perform a concert just before the beginning of Christmas vacation. During the second quarter, students interested in putting on plays, led by Marty Oppenheimer, had found a director who would come as a part-time adjunct faculty member to organize productions. It was the visual artists' turn to develop a project which would serve the whole Evergreen public.

José Arguelles, the Coordinator of the program, was a visionary thinker and doer who was already making his mark in aesthetics, philosophy, and design. Just before coming to Olympia, José and his wife Miriam had seen through publication their book *Mandala*, which was to run to 70,000 copies and to be translated into four languages. José had been mainly responsible for the conception, the text, and some basic designing; Miriam had executed the fully detailed artwork. Toward the end of the second quarter, a delegation of students from the program called upon me as their Dean-of-Group to seek approval and funding for a project they had in mind for the spring quarter: painting a mural in the stairwell.

It would depict dragons in the Chinese style -- sinuous, brightly colored serpents, betokening vitality, good fortune, and even divinity, rather than the menacing, dull-greenish-gray, diabolic,

lizard-like monsters of the Indo-European and Semitic traditions. It would rise from the first-floor entrance of the stairwell up to the fourth-floor landing at roof-level. To all of us in the Deans' Office, who had also spent time in the drab staircase, the project seemed like an excellent idea. We found some salary dollars to employ Miriam Arguelles as a part-time faculty member for the spring to serve as consultant for the project. Don Humphrey, in charge of the academic budget, added funds for materials to the "Man & Art" allocation. I talked Jerry Schillinger, Director of Facilities, into sharing our enthusiasm for the project, which cost him nothing and added to the significance and value of the building. With his support, I was able to get the agreement of the President and Vice Presidents. And so the work on the Dragon Wall could begin.

Through lengthy recent telephone conversations with Eve Shaw (10/12/2015) and Tom Anderson (10/14/2015), both of whom were deeply involved, I learned more about the conception, design, and execution of the project. From the beginning, the program had been organized around the theme of the mythic universe as comprised of the four elements: earth, water, wind (air), and fire. The mural would represent these elements from the heaviest at the bottom through the upward-thrusting flames at the top. I assume that it was José, contemplating the narrowness of the stairwell but also the sheer length of the flights taken together, who had the idea of filling it with dragons – each one representing its element. I assume that, once Miriam joined the project, she supervised the layout sketching, which then would be painstakingly filled and brought to life by the colors. From the photographs from 1972 accompanying the full-color series of 2005, it is clear that Cruz Esquivel joined the students in the painting.

Rather than interviewing further the available members of the program to ascertain who was responsible for what, I hope that the alums of the Man & Art program will send their recollections of the project to the Archivist <stilsonr@evergreen.edu> as addenda to this account. The series of photographs will be found at <<http://archives.evergreen.edu/1976/1976-32/1971-72/Man&Art/index.htm>> The creation of the Dragon Wall was a massive early undertaking – demonstrating what could and would be accomplished at our new college. It moves into the realms of thought and perception which were the homes of Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell. Its story deserves to be told in full detail. A yard-by-yard iconography would be in order. I shall conclude, however, with a few personal reactions to this work of art and of the spirit from my memories of observing the Wall itself, as reinforced by my current study of the photographs.

Contrasts and Complements: The impression made by the Library Building from a distance, except for the clock tower, is one of horizontal weight and solidity, of hard-edged greyness. But the dragons in the stairwell, with their rich colors and the detailed imagery of their realms, exist

in an upward-thrusting diagonal dimension. Ascending energy, vitality, brightness, fullness of meaning – all of these forces are at work. Even if one does not grasp in detail the significance of the imagery, he knows that he is in a special, even sacred place. The building and the stairwell itself deal in rectangles – institutional rectangular surfaces -- edges of walls, stairs, and ceilings which meet each other at 90°. But the dragons themselves and the imagery in which they dwell present roundness, curves, uncoiling, animal and vegetable projections of organic life. The activity and the brightness increase as the viewer climbs. There are the erupting volcano near the bottom and the blast of the atomic bomb near the top. But the dragons keep moving onward and upward. The mural is all the more powerful because its energy is contained in the hardness of the cement and its colors sparkle against the monochrome surroundings. At any rate, I have felt and still feel more at home with the huge Library Building because I know that the Dragon Wall is there inside it.

I hope you will share such feelings. But there are some further sentiments which I have felt in recalling this story. It is ironic but no less significant that the academic budget could provide for part-time adjunct faculty members to serve the Man & Art program because what would have been the salary of Don Heard remained to be drawn upon. So part of my reflections about the Dragon Wall involve the thought that it may also serve as a memorial to Don, who most certainly would have appreciated the effort and the finished work, the aesthetic impact and the spirit which enlivened the project.