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## Learning leadership personified. An interview with Professor Stephen Preskill

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### Keywords

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### Abstract

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In this extensive interview with Stephen Preskill, we cover much ground. We kick off the discussion with Preskill's latest book *Education in black and white*, about Myles Horton, a life-changing teacher and activist whose work at Highlander Folk School influenced the civil rights movement. Preskill discerns three major themes: anti-racism, dialogue and Horton's exemplary life. We then move on to who could be considered heirs of Horton and other Highlander leaders, and Preskill cautions against the pitfalls of charismatic leadership. He shares his positive experiences as a lifelong learner in a Master of Fine Arts program and provides advice on how to deal with academic writing difficulties. Preskill is also the co-author of four books on teacher narratives, democratic discussion, and social justice leadership, which we discuss systematically. He recalls his best and worst discussions and talks about his favorite discussion protocols. Biographically, Preskill recalls his happy childhood and youth in a well-to-do family and being inspired to become a teacher by his positive experience of his university studies. In terms of academic career advice, he advises following our passions before highlighting his approachability and openness as a way of learning leadership.

Stephen Preskill is professor emeritus at Wagner College in Staten Island, New York and a writing consultant at Columbia University. During his thirty years as a university professor (that included appointments at Carleton College and the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, and being the Regents Professor of Education in the Department of Educational Leadership and Organizational Learning in the College of Education at the University of New Mexico), he specialized in American educational history and leadership studies. Before his distinguished academic career, he was an elementary and middle school teacher for nine years.

**Jürgen Rudolph (J. R.):** Thank you so much for making yourself available for this interview for the *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching* (JALT). We are big fans of your work, including your most recent book, *Education and black and white* (2021), which I reviewed (Rudolph, 2023). What made you write a book about the Highlander Folk School and Myles Horton?

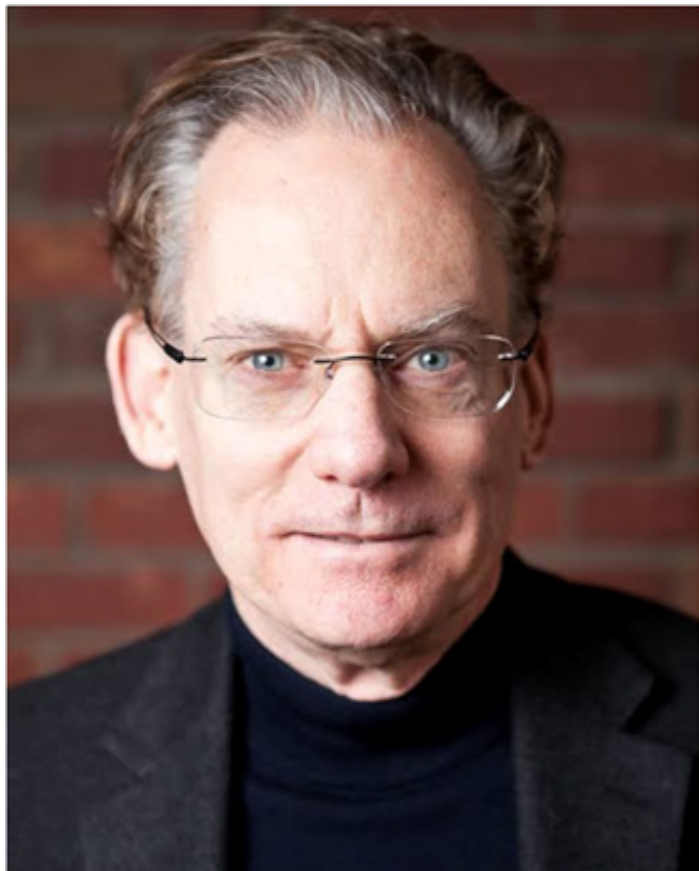


Figure 1. Stephen Preskill.

**Stephen Preskill (S. P.):** I've been aware of Myles Horton and an admirer of him since I saw the Bill Moyers (1981) video interview with him that was done back in 1981. I think it appeared on TV a couple of years later, and my father clued me into this video, and I fell in love with Myles as a person, leader and activist. I've been thinking about him and invoking him for years. In both the books *Stephen Brookfield and I did on discussion*, we mentioned Myles (see Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, 2016), and in *Learning as a way of leading* (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009), we have a profile of Myles.

I have been thinking about him for a long time. I wrote the book because I entered a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program in 2016 and ended up in a book writing course. The idea was to write a book in the course, which I didn't think I would do. But I chose as my subject Myles Horton, and at first, I wanted to do the early life of Horton. My instructor said, 'No, let's have the whole life.' So I started to tackle that. Out of that course came a book proposal and contact with an agent, who eventually led me to the University of California Press. Within a couple of years, I was able to put the book together.

But most important, it was a labor of love because I admire Myles so much. His courage in the face of so much adversity was amazing. All the things that happened to him – getting beaten up multiple times, witnessing Highlander being burned down, and all these difficulties that he had, he never let it stop him. So many other schools, like his adult learning sites, went by the wayside, but not Highlander. Certainly, there are a lot of people to thank for that. But we have to attribute to Myles an enormous amount of credit for keeping Highlander going – not only keeping it going after a lot of difficulties in seeing it closed down in the early '60s but seeing it thrive in the '70s and '80s, right up until he died in 1990.

*I admire Myles Horton so much. His courage in the face of so much adversity was amazing. All the things that happened to him – getting beaten up multiple times, witnessing Highlander being burned down, and all these difficulties that he had, he never let it stop him.*



Figure 2: Myles Horton (seated on the left) with Paulo Freire (seated on the right). Source of extract: Reich (2012).

**J. R.:** You enrolled in an MFA?

**S. P.:** My MFA was a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Nonfiction. The idea is to use nonfiction but in the way that a novelist uses it or someone very committed to compelling narratives. I'm not saying that I did that particularly well. But that was the idea to be able to tell a story that is factually based and to tell it in a way that's intrinsically very interesting.

**J. R.:** Your book certainly succeeded in that exceptionally well. I found it quite unputdownable. It reads like a thriller. As I wrote in my review (Rudolph, 2023), it made me read

more – Horton’s (1998) autobiography and also the talking book with Freire (Horton & Freire, 1990). Wow, that’s amazing that despite being a professor for so many years, you still enrolled in an MFA program.

**S. P.:** It’s something I always wanted to do. I imagined myself as a writer, trying to create vivid pictures of occurrences and of the past, and this was a chance to try my hand out.

**Shannon Tan (S. T.):** What are some important themes in *Education in black and white*? Do you see any heirs apparent of Highlander and Myles Horton in contemporary adult and higher education?

**S. P.:** Clearly, one of the themes is anti-racism. Myles, famously, was called by a black journalist in the early ‘50s, one of seven white people working to stop racism, particularly in the South, but all over the country. He was close to being unique in his commitment to promoting social justice and equity. Myles fought very hard to integrate Highlander. It was a hard thing to do and needs to be remembered. He wasn’t successful right away. It wasn’t until the ‘40s, the end of World War Two and the advent of the United Auto Workers, a pretty liberal union, that started to make it possible for Highlander to be in a great place. But to Myles’s credit, by the early ‘50s, there were as many black people as white people at a typical workshop, which was unheard of. The workshop that Rosa Parks famously went to in 1955 had an equal number of blacks and whites. They did that intentionally. They were able to get fifty people to come together to work through some of the issues that were the fallout from the Brown v. Board of Education decision [that declared school segregation inherently unequal and, therefore, unconstitutional; Preskill, 2021]. So anti-racism is one of the really important themes.

Another theme is dialogue. All my life, and since I was a seventh and eighth-grade teacher, dialogue has been very important to me. In high school, I was a very quiet, introverted person. I’m still an introvert. I never spoke up in class and never said a word. I had an English teacher who was kind of annoying, who said, “Why doesn’t Stephen ever say anything?” She said it right out in class, with all the students there, and I was embarrassed. I don’t know why I rose to that challenge, but since I was a junior in high school, you couldn’t shut me up when it came to discussion. Sometimes I would take it too far. Sometimes I talked too much. I had to learn over the years that the way to participate in discussion is, of course, to contribute, but more than that, to see what’s going on with other people. What is the whole group taking us towards? I’ve had a love for dialogue for a long time. Stephen Brookfield always talks about how he was petrified by dialogue, and that he’d be found out to be a fraud (Brookfield, 2005; Brookfield et al., 2019). That stuff wasn’t my worry. My worry was: how can I learn from all these people? How can I shut myself up, so that I can really hear out what’s happening and bring the voice out of people who never had a chance to say anything?

There are probably a lot of things, but I’ll just end with this third one. Myles’s life, in a lot of ways, is exemplary. I’ve already mentioned his courage and his commitment. The way he dealt with adversity was to keep on going and

not worry about it too much or not let him get down too much. He had this wonderful sense of humor, as you know, and sometimes could take a situation where there’s a lot of tension, dispel that, and find a way to do something constructive around that tension. I love what Frank Adams said about him. He said he was a great listener, but it was hard to get him to shut up. Myles loved to talk, and so it was a real strain for Myles to be quiet, but he learned to do it, which is really something. He wanted to be the one dominating the conversation. But there were sometimes whole weekends or sessions where he brought people together where he didn’t say a word, or the only words he spoke were questions. He is famous for finding a way to use questions to move the discussion to a new level. So anti-racism, dialogue and Myles’ character are the themes that are all important to me.

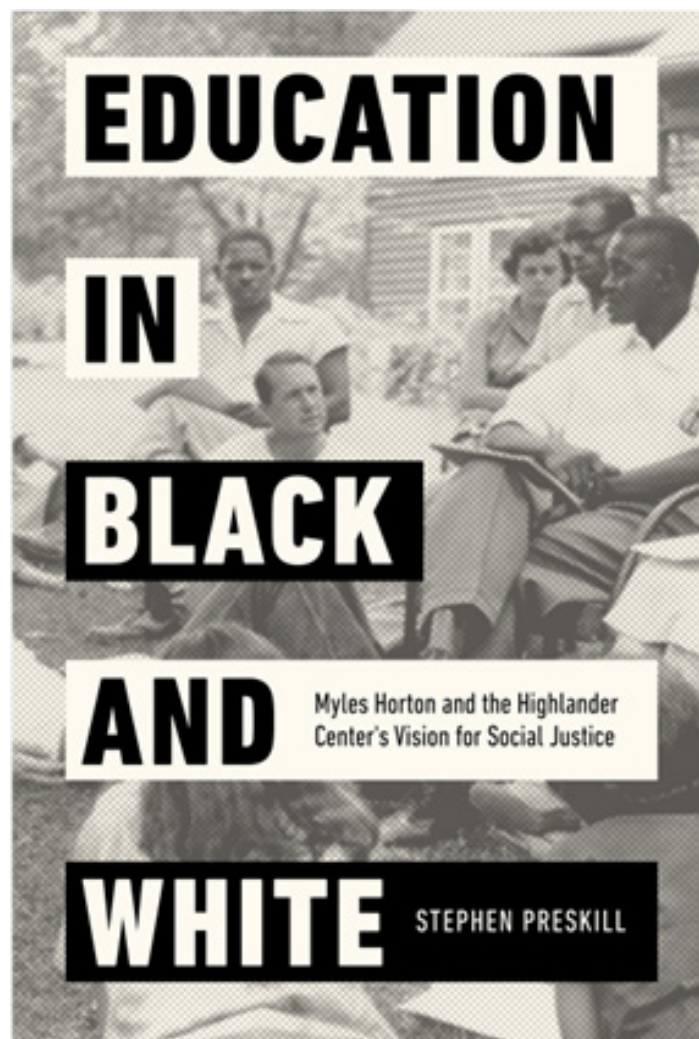


Figure 3: Cover art of Preskill (2021).

Regarding apparent heirs, I’m a big admirer of William Barber and his Moral Mondays in North Carolina. He’s a pastor who’s very committed to social justice and racial equity. It’s so interesting that he works with a woman named Liz Theoharis. She is the partner in this work and the sister to Jeanne Theoharis, who has written this magnificent book about Rosa Parks. It’s called *The rebellious life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Theoharis, 2015). By the way, their father, Athan George Theoharis, was a historian of the FBI and was a real problem to the FBI because he was always bringing out all

this negative stuff about them. This is a family that just lives social justice: Liz Theoharis, Jeanne Theoharis, their father, who's no longer with us, and their brother George Theoharis who's actually in educational leadership. All these people are doing amazing work.



Figure 4: Rev. Dr. William Barber speaking at a Moral Monday rally. Source: Moral Mondays (2022).

Another person whom I admire a lot is Nicholas Longo. He wrote the book *Why community matters: Connecting education with civic life* (2007). He's got a chapter on Highlander, which, at chapter length, is about as good as it gets. It captures what Highlander was all about. He's also got a chapter on Jane Addams, someone I have long admired and whom we wrote about in *Learning as a way of leading* (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). That's another person who I think is just great. I have to mention Barbara Ransby, a biographer and a very involved activist. She wrote the definitive biography of Ella Baker (Ransby, 2003). I don't think anyone's going to write a better biography than what Ransby wrote of Ella Baker. Then, Katherine Charron, who isn't as well known and isn't so much an activist, is a wonderful historian who wrote the definitive biography of Septima Clark. To learn about Septima Clark, the first place to turn is to Katherine Charron's (2012) book, called *Freedom's teacher: The life of Septima Clark*.

The theme is that all these people keep returning to the civil rights movement for sustenance, guidance and wisdom. I feel the same way. I can mention a bunch of other people, all of whom keep turning to the civil rights movement or writing about the civil rights movement or who draw on the lessons of the civil rights movement. Bryan Stevenson, a completely different figure who runs the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), is a lawyer who has done a tremendous amount of work to bring the history of black existence and black oppression in the United States to the forefront of our consciousness. He's a remarkable person, activist and speaker. To me, all these people, and so many others, are carrying on in the tradition of Myles Horton. Jeanne Theoharis and Nick Longo are, of course, very aware of the Horton legacy. Barbara Ransby didn't write that much about Myles in her book about Ella Baker (Ransby, 2003). But they're all following, in some ways, very much in his footsteps.



Figure 5: Ella Baker. Source: Ella Baker (2023).

**J. R.:** There are two things that I would like to follow up on when it comes to your answer. The first one is that I completely agree with you that it's very remarkable for somebody who talks as well as Myles Horton to force himself to be a very good listener, too. He was giving all these speeches. When he served as a lead strike organizer for textile workers in Lumberton, North Carolina, he went on the stage in front of thousands of people (Preskill, 2021). When his passionate speeches left people spellbound, he suddenly realized that he was a charismatic speaker. But then he realized that charismatic leadership is something dangerous. He discussed this in the context of Dr Martin Luther King Jr., who was also very charismatic. As much as he admired Martin Luther King, who was obviously an extremely important historical figure, he also saw the danger of the movement being too focused on Martin Luther King. That is one thought that I wanted to invite your further comment on. The other is a very short question: Do you see any continuities between the Highlander Folk School and contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter?

**S. P.:** First of all, I really appreciate your points about charismatic leadership. It's interesting that two of the greatest critics of Dr King were two people who were constantly being silenced, Ella Baker and Septima Clark. Septima Clark says in a very derisive way: 'we put Magic Man up on the stage, and then he does all this work for us. And in the meantime, we and our work are forgotten.' The dangers of charismatic leadership are really interesting, and Myles did see them. I appreciate you remembering that during that strike, he played the role of an entertainer for all these people. He also tried to inspire folks but recognized that there was something very wrong about his being the dominant voice.

To your second question: I haven't connected much with the contemporary Highlander. But it's incredible how much they're doing around issues of Black Lives Matter and anti-racism brought up to date. Dealing with all sorts of prejudices is the focus of Highlander. One of the co-executive directors of Highlander, Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson, has a really strong social justice background. She herself is black. She's got this amazing commitment to social justice in all its forms. It's possibly true that Highlander, in some ways, is stronger and more sustainable than ever, partly because of Ash-Lee Woodard Henderson and some other people who have been working for Highlander for some time.

**J. R.:** You have written five books, numerous chapters, refereed journal articles, and more journalistic pieces. Do you have any advice for academics who have trouble writing and publishing their work?

**S. P.:** Well, for a long time, I had trouble writing, and in some ways, I still do.

**J. R.:** Hard to believe.

**S. P.:** My best advice is almost like a cliché, but it's just to keep writing and, as much as possible every day, to get thoughts on paper; to not just read but also read by staying alert to that catchy quote or that incisive comment, and to record those. Here's a place where I've gotten a lot of wonderful insights from the reading I've done that I might be able to use at some point in my own writing. Writing in a journal or in some format, where you share daily. For years I worked on a site called 750words.com. I used to go there every day and write my 750 words on all sorts of topics.

*For years I worked on a site called 750words.com. I used to go there every day and write my 750 words.*

**J. R.:** Oh, wow!

**S. P.:** Yeah. I ended up harvesting stuff because they have this wonderful searchable index. I can pull up things I wrote about by putting in a couple of keywords. That's been really helpful to me. One of the things that also inspired some of my writing is that I did a blog back in 2009, and 2010, which I just had a wonderful time doing. It's called the Third New York (<http://thethirdnewyork.blogspot.com/>). I was trying to capture something E. B. White said about New York City in 1948:

There are roughly three New Yorks. There is, first, the New York of the man or woman who was born here, who takes the city for granted and accepts its size and its turbulence as natural and inevitable. Second, there is the New York of the commuter — the city that is devoured by locusts each day and spat out each night. Third, there is the New York of the person who was born somewhere else and came to New York in quest of something... Commuters give the city its tidal restlessness; natives give it solidity and continuity; but the settlers give it passion (White, 2000).

I was very much one of those who moved here who are particularly enthusiastic boosters of New York. My blog was about New York's wonders and delights and sometimes my pains in experiencing New York City. Anyway, that blog launched me on much more extensive writing. It led to *Learning as a way of leading* (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009), *The discussion book* (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016), another book that hasn't been published that I worked on, and then, of course, the Myles Horton book (Preskill, 2021). Now it's influencing what I'm working on around early childhood education in New Mexico.

**S. T.:** Could you please provide us with an overview of your writings? Later, we'd like to ask you more specific questions about three of your works. We are unfamiliar with the one by you and R. S. Jacobvitz on *Stories of teaching: A foundation for educational renewal* (2001). Could you tell us more about that book?

**S. P.:** I'm trained as a historian of education. At first, I was doing a lot of essay reviews and occasional articles around figures in the recent history of education. I did write a short piece about Myles (Preskill, 1991), which is not particularly memorable. I wrote about many different educators, for instance Charles W. Eliot (Preskill, 1989), the president of Harvard and part of my dissertation. While doing that, I started reading all these teacher narratives. Some of them go back a few years: Jonathan Kozol's (1967) *Death at an early age*, Herbert Kohl's (1967) *36 children*, and Mike Rose's (1989) *Lives on the boundary*. All these books inspired me. I don't think I've ever had such a stimulating and pleasurable set of reading experiences as when I was tapping into all these remarkable narratives. The guy I worked with when I wrote the Myles book is Sam Freedman. He wrote a book called *Small victories*, one of the best teacher narratives ever written.

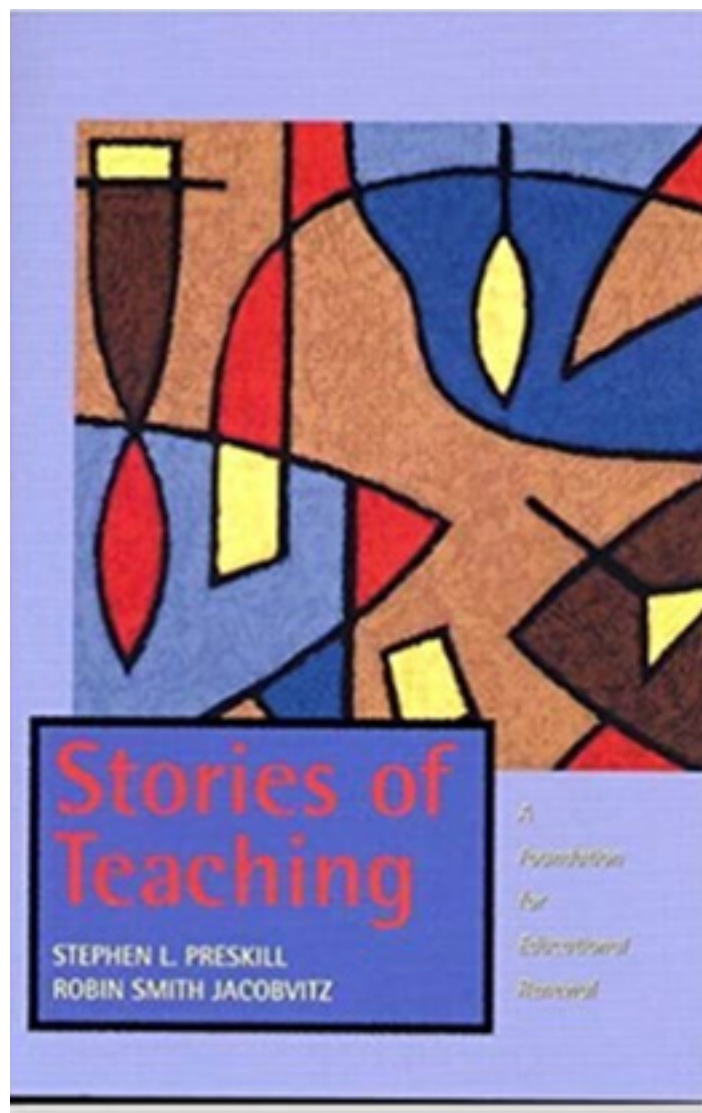


Figure 6: Cover art of Preskill & Jacobvitz, 2001.

Anyway, there are many of these teacher narratives. It seemed to me that they could be the basis for a great teacher education program. You would read all these different narratives and develop different themes from them. I tried to say that there were different kinds of narratives, for instance, one about social justice, one about growth, and one about questioning the system. That was the idea of the book: it was to transform how we do teacher ed by making these teacher narratives a really strong focus of teacher preparation programs. I went through a teacher preparation program, where I read *Teaching as a subversive activity*, one of Neil Postman's early books, with a guy named Charles Weingartner (1971). Postman went on to write *Amusing ourselves to death* (2005) and all these amazing books that people still cite. Reading *Teaching as a subversive activity* was just such an eye-opener. We read so many others. It dawned on me in the '90s how much these books meant to me. So the idea of the book, *Stories of teaching. A foundation for educational renewal* (Preskill & Jacobvitz, 2001), was to bring all those stories together, talk about their themes, their value, what they were trying to get out and try to convince teacher educators. I didn't have much success in changing how we prepare teachers to put much more focus on narrative and story.

**J. R.:** That's fascinating. I must do my best to lay my hands on that book. Together with Stephen Brookfield, you wrote two books on discussion (Brookfield & Preskill, 2012, 2016). You already started to touch on that when you said that dialogue is one of the really important themes in your latest book (Preskill, 2021). You also said that you're an introvert and, I guess, an extrovert by training, like Stephen Brookfield sometimes says. But maybe you could elaborate on this a little more: why is discussion so crucial in your writings and when you teach?

**S. P.:** So yeah, discussion is one of the most important things, if not the most important. It comes back to something as banal but as important as democracy. It's our way in the classroom of practising democracy. I also saw pretty clearly that the more we could have discussions with a lot of participation and involvement by students, the more joy they got out of the experience. It didn't have to be a scary thing. It could be this incredibly uplifting and exciting thing. That's when I found again and again that I got tremendous joy from discussion.

I was a seventh-grade teacher back in 1973. I was trying to get my students to engage in discussion in really constructive ways, and one day, they just took off. They didn't even need me. They're having this amazing conversation, and I'm not even part of it. I snuck away to get my department chair, a guy I loved named Larry Northam, and I brought Larry in. For about 10 minutes, they kept going before it all fell apart. But I was so proud of them for finding a way to make discussion work without my involvement because we practised it so much anyway, ever since then. That was one of the best discussions I ever had, and I never had any responsibility for it [all laugh]. It pretty much just happened spontaneously. I love those kids for doing that. I know they have a ball finding a way to talk to each other in constructive, thoughtful, and pretty critical ways – critical in the best possible sense.

Discussion is just so important. There's one of the things I wanted to mention: one of the things I love about what Stephen Brookfield and I have tried to do. If you look at the stuff we've written, you can see it emerging. We wanted to get as concrete as possible about how to have constructive discussions, something like conversational moves. We say what the moves are, though we didn't exhaust all the possibilities. 'Here are some things you can do in a discussion to keep it going, contribute to, or enhance it.' I think we did that a lot. The whole idea of *The discussion book* (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016) was to take all these crazy ideas we had – many of which were mine and aren't terribly workable. The first ten are the first ten for a reason because they are the best ones. There are a few others that are pretty creative and work pretty well. But the idea was to give people a handle, a way into a powerful and constructive discussion. Sometimes it didn't have to be commenting. Sometimes it was just asking a question. Sometimes it was just being quiet. Sometimes it was a kind of body language. There were lots of ways to do it. I loved our shared commitment to concretizing what discussion is. If we made any contribution to thinking about discussion, it is this. It is this attempt to concretize it and make it more specific.

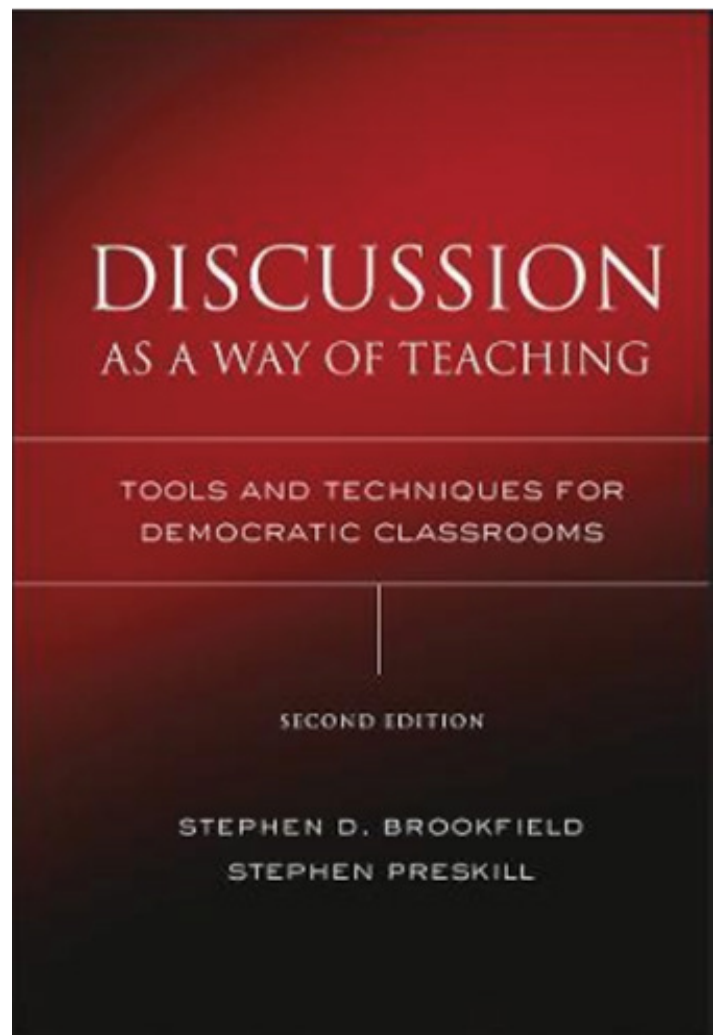


Figure 7. Cover art of Brookfield & Preskill (2005).

**J. R.:** I really appreciate the concreteness of *The discussion book* (Brookfield & Preskill, 2016). I don't know whether you agree with me. Still, I sometimes feel that students in certain

countries, for instance, the US or Australia, often people have the gift of the gab and they're very comfortable speaking. Of course, it's an absolute joy having a discussion with them. But in Singapore, it can be slightly more challenging. There can be language issues with international students, not Singaporean students. The general culture, especially Singapore Chinese culture, is perhaps a bit more reserved, and the communication style is succinct, as opposed to elaborate. So that's why it's good to have some methods, prompts, and discussion protocols that one can try out. I like your advice to not give up on a specific discussion protocol after the first time and to keep trying because one gets better at it with practice and reflection. I like lots of stuff about your books on discussion, including the nonverbal discussion of Chalk Talk and the Appreciative Pause.

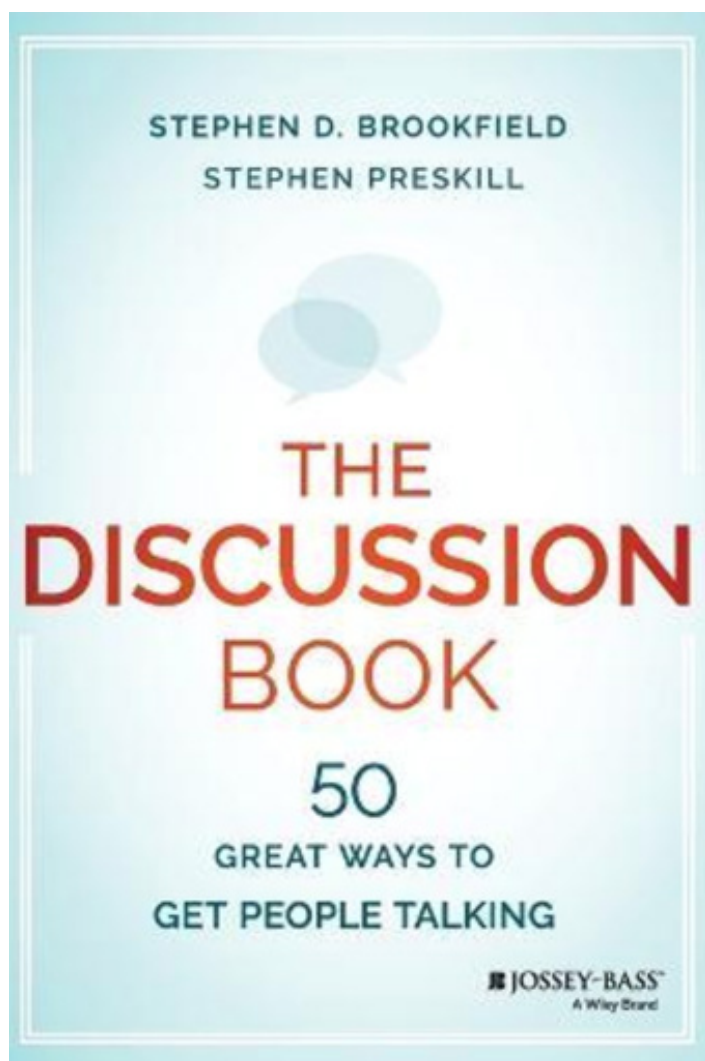


Figure 8. Covert art of Brookfield & Preskill (2016).

**S. P.:** That reminds me of another thing I have to mention: the importance of small groups. None of this works if you're in a large group all the time. The movement between the small group and a large group is just a crucial piece of what we write about and what Stephen Brookfield does so brilliantly in the workshops that he gives. A small group offers students a chance to participate right from the beginning and not be left out. They may not be participating in the large group yet, but they can in the small group, giving them an incentive and a good feeling. I think that will lead to their

participation in subsequent class sessions. So wanting to get everybody involved in some way right from the beginning is an important part of our strategy.

**S. T.:** Do you have any favourite (and least favourite) discussion protocols? You've already mentioned the top ten.

**S. P.:** I've always loved Circle of Voices. It's one of our go-to's. It's a good example of where everybody has an opportunity to speak. They don't have to, but they almost always do. Then, that breaks the ice for so many people. Circle of Voices is one of those, but I like all of the top ten and modalities that are not in the top ten. I've always loved Quotes to Affirm and Challenge. It's wonderfully concrete and gets people into a text in ways they wouldn't otherwise. It's in the top ten techniques for text-based discussions, but overall only number 37. Circular Response is another one we love to use, where it allows people to comment and build on what a previous person has said.

We're probably unique in promoting the idea of the Appreciative Pause. Stephen and I have always showed appreciation for one another. It has become a really important part of our workshops. One of the lessons that we've learned is when you ask for Appreciative Pauses or expressions of appreciation, there will be extended silence. It's possible for there to be a minute or even two minutes of silence, which, of course, is excruciatingly long without a response. Partly what's going on is they're thinking of a moment, but they're also unsure what to say. But once someone says something, you get this whole barrage of comments, memories and key moments for folks. That's another important lesson about discussion, this whole wait-time idea. We sometimes take it to an extreme, but we think it pays off to take time to think.

**J. R.:** The Appreciative Pause is a great discussion protocol. I also like the Circle of Voices and thanks for pointing out Quotes to Affirm and Challenge that I need to read up on. You were already saying that your seventh graders had one of the best discussions you have ever witnessed. Could you also tell us what was the worst that you have experienced?

**S. P.:** One of the worst happened at a Teachers' College. We had a number of students from Singapore. One of our participants, not from Singapore, was a woman who seemed to have an objection to every activity we tried. She was just a very negative influence in the workshop and, for some reason, began to attack the Singapore students for being too passive. I got so angry. Stephen Brookfield remembers this well. I was standing probably ten feet away from her. I stiffened and started to take a step towards her. That's all I did. But it did feel threatening to her and kind of scared me, too, but I was so fed up with her negativism.

I almost didn't know what to do with it. I was so frustrated, but it still was a terrible thing, even to suggest that I was going to move towards her and get her to shut up or whatever. So that's by far the worst discussion I was part of, partly because of her behavior, but also partly because of this reaction that came from deep inside me, which could have resulted in something really awful. So that was bad. We then later both wrote pretty lengthy letters of apology to her. She never responded to mine. She did warm to

Stephen's concerns a little bit. But we haven't seen her for many years. This happened back in 2015 or 2016.

**J. R.:** That sounds relatively harmless to me. I've done worse than you.

**S. P.:** I don't know, it felt very bad to me. It hurt me especially because it seemed so unfair to the students from Singapore to be attacking them or taking advantage of them in some way. I could restrain myself, but I should have controlled myself more anyway. That one does stand out.

**J. R.:** Thank you so much for sharing. We'd like to move on to your book *Learning as a way of leading* (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009), which I tremendously enjoyed reading. For our JALT readers who haven't read it, what is your concept of learning leadership? How did you arrive at the various learning tasks, and how did you choose the leaders for that book? Would you make any changes, maybe for a second edition?

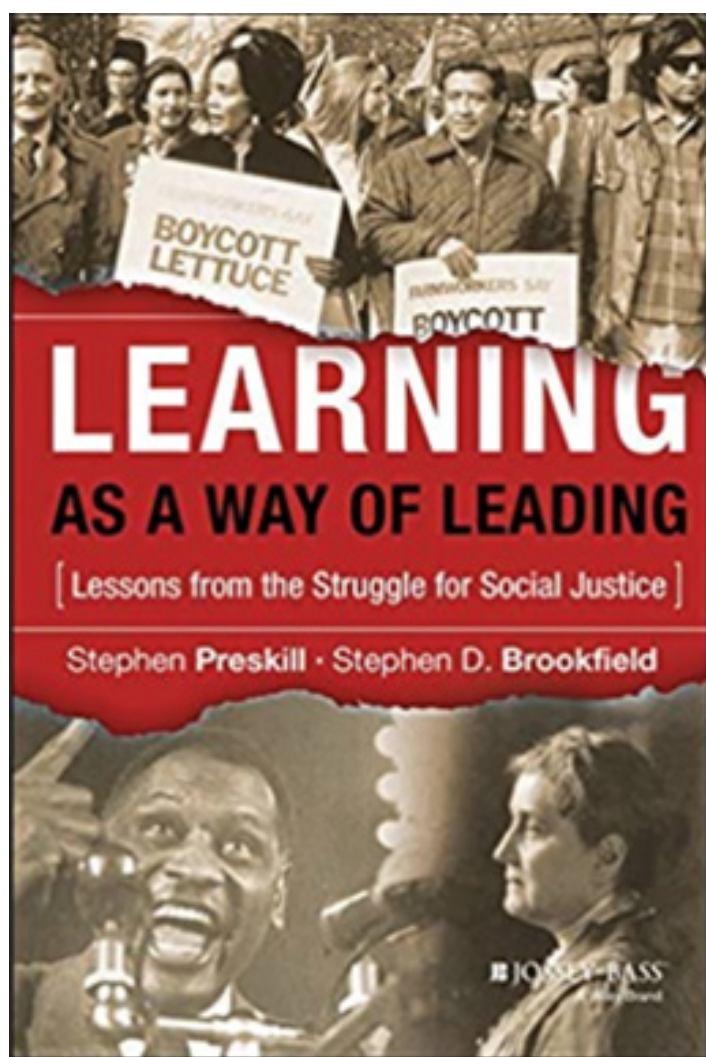


Figure 9. Cover art of Preskill & Brookfield (2009).

**S. P.:** Over time, it occurred to us – and this is partly learning from Myles – that so much of the leadership that these leaders we admire were demonstrating was partly about learning. At the very end of *Education in black and white*, I quote Myles Horton saying: “You educate by your own life, who you are, I’m interested in people learning how to learn.

Now the only way I can help is to share my enthusiasm, and my ability to learn myself. If I quit learning I can't share” (cited in Preskill, 2021, p. 293). In his 1927 study of Danish folk schools, Joseph K. Hart wrote: “We have plenty of men and women who can teach what they know... but very few who can teach their own capacity to learn” (cited in Preskill, 2021, p. 293). “Myles Horton dedicated his life to knowing and acting on the difference” (Preskill, 2021, p. 293).

*“We have plenty of men and women who can teach what they know... but very few who can teach their own capacity to learn”. Myles Horton dedicated his life to knowing and acting on the difference.*

So that's the theme: Myles is this wonderful learner, who models learning, demonstrates how he learns and inspires and activates others to learn in similar ways. Ella Baker, who's another one of our leaders, was always talking about her own learning and bringing activists together, not even primarily to take action, but to learn and then to use that learning and be able to articulate what was learned as the basis for the action that they would take. So our understanding of learning leadership was sort of there. But it also emerged from the people we were reading about and the people we drew on. We must have had about 50 leaders that we thought about writing about. But the ones that stood out, who in one way or another were learning leaders in this really powerful way, were people like Jane Addams and a lot of civil rights leaders I've talked about: Septima Clark, Ella Baker, and Myles. Occasionally, we bring in somebody different, like Aldo Leopold, an environmentalist I was reading and getting a lot out of.

But they were all explicit about talking about how their leadership grew out of their learning, grew out of what they were learning from others, what they were reading, what they were experiencing, what they came to see, inspired people and made a difference for people and then using more of that, pouring that on as one leader said so that people would be even more inspired and more incited to take action and to try to make a difference in their communities. When we narrowed it down to the nine leaders, we were looking for a mix of leaders in terms of race and gender, in particular. These are the ones that we ended up with. We were also thinking already that there was a particular strategy or way in which these leaders learned, and we wanted to make a chapter not just about the people, but also about openness or supporting the growth of others, about critical thinking, that kind of thing.

Would we make any changes for a possible future edition? We've had lots of conversations about this. And neither one of us has found the time to do it. But if we were to do it again, we think we'd use much more contemporary figures. Bryan Stevenson has become a real hero of mine. I would do a profile of him and the ways in which he's a learner and a teacher. We'd want to draw on and learn from William Barber because he frames much of his work as a commitment to learning and new enlightenment. So it would be a whole different group of leaders. I'm unsure who else we would



include and if we would repeat any of them. Another person I've been a lifelong lover of is Bill Moyers, the journalist. Moyers (1981) did that original dialogue with Myles that brought Myles to the attention of many people who didn't know about him. In his whole journalistic career, since he was an advisor to President Johnson in the '60s, Moyers has been about learning, whether it's about learning about the mind, genesis, or poetry, or learning about evil. The range of things that Bill Moyers has looked at is so striking to me.

By the way, just a quick story about Bill Moyers. My wife and I had just seen the movie about Ruth Bader Ginsburg. We came out of the movie and had a drink. It's a very nice theater where there was also a bar connected. And this party of people came out, and Bill Moyers was part of it! There was a small group, and it seemed very informal. And I'm telling my wife Karen: 'Should I go tell Moyers I'm writing about Myles?' I introduced myself and said, 'I just appreciate so much, Mr Moyers, all the work you've done, and I want you to know I'm writing a book about Myles Horton,' and he got all excited. He said, 'Oh, that's so important. People are forgetting Myles. They don't know about him. It's been so long since anyone wrote about him. You need to do this book. And I'm so glad you're doing it.' And we emailed a little bit. I was going to use his phrase from the TV show he put together, referring to Myles as a "radical hillbilly". It was in the title, and Moyers said, 'No, no, that's too disparaging a term now.' He cautioned me, and I'm so glad I emailed him. Because it could have easily been a better title and a catchier one, but it also would have been the wrong one to use. Bill Moyers has been such an important teacher to me, and I can't even begin to name all the fields on which he's shed light that I wouldn't have otherwise had.

**J. R.:** In *Education in black and white* (Preskill, 2021, p. 5), you contrasted your own background with the deep poverty that Myles Horton grew up in and wrote that you are the

product of a well-to-do family that settled in a prosperous Chicago suburb in the early 1950s. My father worked as an executive for a successful electronics company and my mother, who had earned a law degree, stayed home to care for my two brothers and me. I had virtually no adversity in my life. I attended a public high school that in many ways was the equivalent of an elite private academy. And although I didn't end up attending Ivy League schools or accumulating a lot of money, I never really lacked for anything.

Could you please tell us a bit about your childhood and youth, especially concerning your experience of education?

**S. P.:** What I said is absolutely true. My family was stable. There wasn't a lot of tension or difficulty there. It was a very safe place to be. The schools I attended were pretty good to very good, and I did okay in them. But the downside of all that was that I had no adversity. It was such an easy life, and I was really a spoiled kid in a lot of ways and less adventurous than I think I might have been. And I was making a lot of safe choices. I was not a particularly successful student. I have a brother. His name is John Preskill. He is one of the leading

physicists in the world.

**J. R.:** Wow!

**S. P.:** Right now, if you want to understand more about quantum computing, one of the most prominent names is John Preskill. Part of my challenge growing up was that he was brilliant, from the very beginning, from when he was a baby. My mother remembers watching him play with pots and pans on the floor and organize them in ways you don't expect a two-year-old to do. She knew this was a genius. My older brother was a very successful physician. Both were very accomplished, and I was a classic middle child, caught between, who didn't do particularly well in school, and who was very slow to learn to read. And my well-off parents had to hire a tutor one summer to get me up to speed so that I was ready for fourth grade because I still was a very reluctant and not very accomplished reader. Anyway, that helped. But I still struggled.

I went to a pretty non-competitive college. I got a good education there at Ithaca college. But there was nothing special about it. It was special if you were in certain fields, like music or television production, but I was a history major. That was not a place that many history majors came out of. But I did have a wonderful student-teaching experience. I realized I wanted to be a teacher coming out of Ithaca. I got a teaching job in a similar suburban situation in greater New York, which is, if anything, even more prosperous than the community I grew up in.

Anyway, my memories of my childhood are largely very positive. But again, it was like a nothing-happened childhood. There was so little risk and difficulty that I look back on it as a time that was limited in terms of what I learned or benefited. But I was lucky to be as safe, well-off, and trouble-free as I was. I've lived a charmed life. I continue to be largely trouble-free, and I attribute a lot of that to the beginning that set me on this very prosperous, safe and un-risky course.

I don't know what else to say. I had a lot of joy growing up. I loved sports. I loved baseball. Everything that mattered to me came back to baseball. Ultimately, I memorized all these statistics that are still in my head. And all of it stopped in 1975. Now, I'm not going to go into baseball history, where I watched a very famous world series on television and was blown away by. But then, after that, I just completely forgot about it. So baseball is a thing of the past. But when I think about growing up, one of the first things I think about is how much I loved to play baseball. Though not good enough to be a competitive athlete, I was pretty good. And then also how much I loved to follow it professionally.

I know Stephen Brookfield sometimes says that his first leadership role was as the captain of a soccer team in England (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). I didn't have that kind of leadership experience when I was young, but I remember the unbridled joy of playing sandlot baseball. Sometimes we played baseball in the street, and somebody would want to go to the bathroom. And I'd say, "No no, not yet". I thought if I let somebody go to the bathroom, the game would end, and the game was everything [all laugh]. You

can't go to the bathroom or go for a drink of water because you won't come back out. This is such a vivid memory of mine and vivid fear. The game has to keep going. To this day, sometimes I think of discussion as a game that we have to keep going. We have to keep adding to it and maybe add another challenging or really interesting piece so that people will continue interacting. I don't want that discussion to end, and I certainly don't want it to end prematurely.



Figure 10: A picture of a baseball figurette of Stephen Preskill that was made when he was about ten years old.

**S. T.:** You briefly mentioned just now that you had a very positive experience as a student of history at Ithaca College, which helped you decide to become a history teacher and a teacher in general. How did you experience teaching at Great Neck South Junior High School (1972 – 1976) and later as a Special Education Coordinator and Social Studies Teacher at South Burlington High School and Middle School in Vermont (1976-1981)?

**S. P.:** One of my early joys as a professional teacher at Great Neck South Junior High School was working with the Social Studies Department of incredible teachers. My department chair was so committed to pushing the boundaries of what we could do and believing in discussion, critical thinking, and the idea of getting students to problem-solve and giving them situations to make sense of. But the whole department was just full of intellectuals. They just cared about teaching so much and were so creative. I felt a little lost in that group, but also looked up to them so much. They were mentors to me, and I was this 22-year-old kid who knew very little about teaching or, for that matter, about history. I was trying to find a way to make it work.

I did have discipline problems, particularly with the eighth-grade students I taught. I had two eighth-grade classes

and three seventh-grade. The seventh-graders worked out great, the eighth-graders not so much. After that first year, they assigned me only to seventh-grade classes, which was a wonderful experience. I learned a lot about teaching, and I learned a lot about connecting with students and facilitating situations that they would find interesting and compelling and want to pursue further. But my wife and I, at the time, didn't want to stay on Long Island anymore, and Long Island felt like a trap. The traffic was so terrible, and you couldn't get anywhere. You were just always stuck there. There were a lot of things we didn't like about it, and we were charmed by the idea of going to Vermont.

So I went to this program, where I learned to be a consulting teacher. The idea was to work with teachers in mainstreaming mildly disabled kids – kids who come in with low IQ scores or who are having trouble adjusting to classes were discipline problems and were often my responsibility. I would help teachers make that work. That was really interesting work for me, which I loved.

But while I'm teaching, I'm also going through my autodidact period, which I haven't had a chance to mention. I'm just reading all the books that I've never had a chance to read. I'm fascinated by history, but I'm reading poetry and theater and spending so much of my spare time reading. I'm catching up on all the years I have lost as a not-very-good reader. Now it's just all connecting, and rockets are going off. I'm so excited about it all, and I can't wait to get back to my reading.

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Fortunately, my wife also wanted to do graduate studies. We both applied to the University of Illinois in Urbana. I got into two different programs. But I chose to be in the history of education program. She was in this evaluation program led by Robert Stake, who was one of the leading people at the time. She was having a great time. I had the time of my life. We were there for three years. I would have stayed longer, but she wanted to leave after three years. It was like this intellectual feast. It was just incredible.

Then I got a job, much to my surprise, at a little liberal arts college, but quite a wonderful one in Minnesota: Carleton College. I eventually became the Chair of Education there. Then, for various reasons, I didn't stay. But from there on end, I'm connected to higher ed. And it's pretty easy for me to get the next job and the next promotion. So I move on from there to a really nice Catholic College in St. Paul, Minnesota. And then, my wife and I both got jobs at the University of New Mexico. And we're there for quite a few years.

When I moved to St. Thomas, in Minnesota and then to the University of New Mexico, I began to see that leadership is a place for me. There wasn't as much call for historians of education as I would have liked there to be, and there wasn't much of a place for me to do that work. But the leadership work was appealing to a lot of people. There were departments of educational leadership that I could become a part of, yet still bring perspectives on the history of civil rights, dialogue, social justice, community activism, and civic education. All these things are connected to leadership. So I began to think of myself as a kind of leadership scholar. I got to continue to teach a course called Biography and Leadership, the most rewarding and fulfilling course I ever taught, and I taught it for five years. It led right into all these things I ended up writing, including *Discussion as a way of teaching* (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005), *Stories of teaching* (Preskill & Jacobvitz, 2001), and *Leading as a way of learning* (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). All of the things I did with Stephen Brookfield were extensions of the work I had found, discovered and loved in Minnesota and New Mexico. I finished at Wagner College in Staten Island, where I continued to do much of the same work.

**J. R.:** The switch from special and K-12 education to higher education was kind of seamless for you?

**S. P.:** I put the special ed stuff behind me. It was an important part of who I was, but I just let it go once I got to graduate school. I did end up teaching some courses when necessary on special ed in higher ed, but it just wasn't an important part of my work. So yeah, I guess you could call it pretty seamless.

**J. R.:** Do you have any advice on having a long and satisfying career as a university professor?

**S. P.:** I used to give this advice over and over, and for many years, and my advice was: 'don't try to do work that's going to get you tenure and promotion, or that's going to bring some limited attention. Do the work you love!' It's true that I probably was just really lucky that I was able to focus on stories, narrative, history, and social justice at a time when a lot of that wasn't exactly in demand. But I was able to make it work by combining it with other things that maybe were more in demand. But I feel like I didn't have to sacrifice some things that were important to me in order to gain advancement and promotions in different universities. I could largely be me. I was rewarded for being just this person whose commitments I wore on my sleeve, which were very clear and consistent and were constantly expressed through my teaching, leadership and writing. People were able to see that, so my advice is don't try to psych out the promotion and tenure people because you'll make yourself miserable. And you still might not get a promotion and tenure! Try to do to the extent that you can what you enjoy the most, what satisfies you the most, that has something closer to intrinsic value for you, and you'd be better off. I haven't had a chance to give much advice lately. But I used to be asked this all the time, and that's what I always came back to. Once again, here's this fortunate life. I was just really lucky to be able to do what I love from a very early period once I ended up in higher ed. It worked out really well.

**J. R.:** It's great advice that reminds me a little of the famous graduation speech by Steve Jobs (2005). I think he was saying to do what you love and not settle for second best. It also reminds me of the current focus on STEM subjects. There is this, in my opinion, misguided belief that you need to study certain subjects – and God forbid, not the humanities, social sciences or fine arts – in order to have a promising future and be employable. I don't think at all that this is how it works.

**S. P.:** I'm with you! [All laugh.]

**S. T.:** Could you tell us a little bit more about your future plans? Is there anything we did not cover that you would still like to talk about?

**S. P.:** My current and future plan is to write about the family development program at the University of New Mexico that has helped New Mexico as a state to become one of the leaders in the nation, serving families with young children and seeing to it that early childhood education is an option for everyone, regardless of background or wealth or anything.

James Heckman, an economist at the University of Chicago who has written extensively about early childhood, has greatly influenced me. He's been claiming now for many years, after winning the Nobel Prize for Economics, that the full funding of early childhood education is one of the keys to realizing a country's sustainable future. It's that important. When we don't do it, it affects us in multiple negative ways. I want to understand that better and understand how New Mexico was able to do this through its family development program and tell some stories. I've been having fun drafting some of the chapters because I feel like I'm getting a chance to use some of my creative writing abilities to put people in the situation and dramatize things a little bit more, and to make the writing that I'm doing even more accessible and even more compelling for people to read. I still have a long way to go on that, but I think I have a real chance. I still need to get a book contract, though. So I sent a proposal to the University of New Mexico Press. It's a very nice, smaller press, but I think it would be a very appropriate place to publish the book. In the next couple of weeks, I hope to hear something positive. Anyway, that's a big part of what I'm doing.

The one thing I haven't had a chance to talk about is something about the importance of being a full, kind, welcoming person in higher ed. I write about this in one or two of the books: that my job isn't to get students interested in what I'm interested in. My job is to be interested in what students are doing and find a way to help them get that expressed or published. I think that's been a really important part of my life. It isn't about me; it's about them.

*My job isn't to get students interested in what I'm interested in. My job is to be interested in what students are doing and find a way to help them get that expressed or published... It isn't about me; it's about them.*

My commitment to openness means I'm committed to what they want to pursue and what they want to learn more about, whereas so many professors are trying to push students towards their area of interest. I've intentionally avoided that and tried to say, 'I want to know where you are, and what you care about, or what you have passion for, and figure out a way to keep that going and reinforce that.' That's been a source of tremendous satisfaction for me. I've, in a lot of ways, been seen as a leader in higher ed, not primarily for what I've written, and not even primarily for what I've taught, but primarily for the way I've interacted with individual students who are trying to write dissertations or master's theses or who're just trying to find themselves intellectually and professionally. I've been a sounding board. I've been a person that people could go to and have open, honest and helpful conversations that would give students a clearer sense of how they might move forward on something they have a real passion for. In some ways, that's the hardest thing to document. But the thing I'm the proudest of is that I've been that kind of person to students, and I hope to everyone, but particularly the students I've come in contact with as a professor.

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**J. R.:** These are inspiring words. Attending your class at Teachers College, Columbia University, team-teaching with Stephen Brookfield, was an absolute pleasure. I had a wonderful time, though I was in a different time zone. I was worried I would fall asleep because I don't go to bed that late. But it was so captivating that I had no trouble staying awake till 4 am. The whole team teaching concept also came alive the way the two of you did it.

**S. P.:** I haven't talked about how much I've learned from Stephen Brookfield about discussion and writing. He was surprised to see *Education in black and white* as strongly written as it was because I haven't always been as strong a writer for some of our joint projects. But to the extent that the 'Myles book' is the best work I've done, I have to pay tribute to Stephen for his support, guidance and tolerance of my less-than-great efforts but his commitment to making them good. I can never be Stephen Brookfield. At some

point, I thought I could try to be like him, but I don't have his wit and ability to articulate ideas so clearly. But I've really enjoyed being a kind of partner to him and how much I've gotten out of it. Of course, he's also a really good friend, and we have wonderful conversations. To have all of that, it's been a great thing for me. I'm very grateful to Stephen for all the ways he's made my life richer and better.

**S. T.:** Thank you so much for this great interview!

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