



2021

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Recommended Citation

Maxwell, Ross R. (2021) "Ross R. Maxwell: An Autobiography," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 85 : No. 85 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol85/iss85/4>

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Ross R. Maxwell: An Autobiography

Ross R. Maxwell

2019

Sometimes the most significant event is something that did not happen. I did not go to nursery school or to kindergarten, and I now suspect that this helped me keep my curiosity and imagination unfettered. Either something interested me, or it did not. In school, from first grade to graduate school, I never asked for help. I would listen to others only if what they had to say interested me — if not, I would tune them out.

Learning was easy and valued in my family. But since I could get reasonably good grades without working, I basically did what I pleased. In fact, in Pullman, the only teachers who inspired me to do any real work were Bill Barnes in history, Marcus Mitchell in chemistry, and Curtis Bowers in math. His math class was the center of high school life for me since we stayed together all four years.

My most important teacher was my older brother Douglas, who had a vast curiosity. It was from him that I learned many things, including the rudiments of science. He also opened the world of classical music for me. Together we devoured *The World Book Encyclopedia* and discussed all issues. Together we read the famous series of articles in *Colliers Magazine* about rocket ships and rotating ring space stations. (I have since learned that we were not alone, for this three-part series fired the imaginations of many others.) And with Paul Spencer, we became avid readers of science fiction.

I have always loved dams, railroads and bridges. Only later as an environmentalist has my ardor for dams cooled, but not for railroads or bridges. I spent many hours haunting the model railroad shops in Spokane and drawing up elaborate model railroad track plans. The highlight of a trip to San Francisco at age 10 was to see the Golden Gate Bridge. (I have lived in the Bay Area since 1963, and I still love it.)

If learning about the world was easy, learning who I was, and where I fit into the world, has not been so easy. As a freshman in college, I was shocked when I was not accepted into the advanced math class. I then learned that I can best understand something if I can visualize it, but this meant that as math became more abstract it became increasingly difficult. I am still learning about myself and how my brain works.

I have been a reader with broad interests. I remember once in the eighth grade, when I tried to explain something about heat that I had read in the *Scientific American*, I became completely flustered. Just because I had an intuition of how something worked did not mean that I had mastered it sufficiently to explain it. Nevertheless, in the past 25 years, I have increasingly learned to trust my intuition and judgment.

Not that the first flash of inspiration is always correct, but I have acquired enough knowledge in many fields to sense when some thought is not quite right and to send it back to the drawing boards.

At Pomona College I majored in history and took as much science as I could, while sampling other fields. I discovered that I was a generalist. The world, I thought, needs generalists like myself, who can make connections between the various disciplines and specialties. The problem was that I was not sure what I wanted to do. I envied those who knew exactly what they wanted to be, say, a doctor, or if really talented, to dedicate oneself to this talent, such as music. I remember one dinner table discussion, where I stated my perplexity, and someone said: “You are interested in science and history, so why don’t you go into the history of science?” But that did not feel right — I wanted to explore something new, not explain what someone else had done.

After college, I did this and that, including driving a cab and making maps for the National Park Service — both of which helped lead to an interest in planning and traffic engineering. I also sang in the San Francisco Bach Choir, where I met Phyllis Grilikhes. She is a former dancer, and an active classical pianist, tapestry maker and poet. After we married in 1971, she obtained her PhD, and currently she teaches psychology at City College of San Francisco.

In 1972, I received a master’s degree in transportation engineering at the University of California in Berkeley. I have since worked in the San Francisco offices of two international consulting firms, Wilbur Smith and Associates (1972-1980) and Parsons Brinckerhoff (1980 to present).

One of the more interesting jobs was that in the mid-1970s I helped reroute the San Francisco MUNI bus routes. The transit system had been developed piecemeal since the 1860s by competing private street railways. More significantly, no serious attempt had been made to rationalize the system since 1901, when many of the franchises were consolidated. The situation was a mess — bus lines running down parallel streets a block apart; routes meandering, because as a late franchise it had to avoid streets that already had franchises; diesel buses running up terribly steep hills that once had been cable car routes.

In the process, I found that I had an edge over the other planners because I was able to think about the routes and the schedules simultaneously. There was a great pleasure in the deep involvement of living and breathing transit routes, and creatively restructuring them, as the principal planner. I thought, however, that given the Byzantine politics of San Francisco, this planning study would share the fate of many others, namely, to sit on a shelf. Luckily, during the middle of the study, the agency over MUNI acquired a powerful new general manager who recognized our creativity and fought the political battles for us, while we planners implemented the plan.

In the late 1980s I designed and implemented the traffic control system for the Hanging Lake Tunnel on I-70 in Glenwood Canyon, Colorado. In the process, I developed a new algorithm for detecting traffic incidents during light traffic flows, and I have since been working at the cutting edge of incident detection technology. Subsequently, I have worked on the traffic controls systems for the Central Artery in Boston, a massive \$10 billion project, and the Devil's Slide Tunnel (now, the Tom Lantos Tunnels), just south of San Francisco.

I presented a paper at the Transportation Research Board in Washington, D.C.; first, it described how the Swiss Federal Railway had developed a timed-transfer system for all public transport modes (trains, buses, ferries, cableways, etc.) that covers the entire country and, second, it addressed the applicability of such a timed-transfer system for metropolitan regions in the United States. I had presented, without success, the same idea back in 1991 to the American Passenger Transport Association meetings. Nor, at that time, was I able to interest anyone in my company. Now, however, the time is ripe. I think in part this is because crippling traffic congestion has spread into the metropolitan suburban areas, forcing people to look for new solutions. The idea has sparked interest, and currently professionals inside my company, as well as research professors in transportation, have joined me in developing a research grant proposal.

In the late 1970s I began to read history again. Also, books on consciousness and other unclassifiable important books, such as Ernest Becker's *The Denial of Death*, and more recently, Jane Jacobs' *Systems of Survival*, and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*. I found myself thinking, "Yes, yes, but if you would just look at it from this other angle, your theory would be stronger."

From this start, a theoretical framework has slowly emerged into which I have woven bits and pieces of isolated facts that I have learned over the years. A new way of viewing the world would lead to another, as the pieces fitting together have suggested new areas. I found whole worlds to explore, and ways of thinking that combined history, culture, consciousness, our cognitive mental abilities, our sense of self, the nature of civilization and the worldviews of particular civilizations. Fields of study that I had found uninteresting or boring in college, such as the psychology of perception, now took on new meaning. Books that I had positively hated in college, such as Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, I finally understood, and appreciated.

In 1981 I joined the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, to which I have regularly presented papers. I am a member of The Institute for Historical Study, a group of independent (and affiliated) scholars in the San Francisco Bay Area. I am also a member of the Language Origin Society, the World History Society, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, at all of which I have given papers.

If asked, I would call myself a cognitive historian, but that term does not cover all my currently active areas of research. These include the figure/ground nature of gestalts (a gestalt exists in the foreground of the mind in relation to a background), which can be developed into a model with significant implications. This model of the gestalt creating mechanisms in our brain/minds also creates, I suggest, our sense of self, words, metaphors, and the “mind space” (that subjective arena, as it were, in which our thoughts roam).

The model of the sense of self generates, I suggest, different types of selves in relation to the different social and cultural contexts, such as the difference between the individualized self and a familial self. In addition, the proposed gestalt and metaphor theories provide, I suggest, a way to understand fundamental differences in the worldviews of the Greek, Indian and Chinese civilizations.

A proposed extension to Thomas S. Kuhn’s theory of the nature of scientific revolutions would both enrich it and answer the complaints of many of his critics. In addition, I would propose a theory linking specialization and civilization, the elaboration of which leads to an understanding of the symbiotic relationship between several different types of moral systems. The history of information holds great promise for theoretical development, as well.

I feel rich with fruitful ideas, possibilities, and choices for the future.