

UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity

Volume 13
Number 1 *Forum Theme: (Re)presenting
(Im)migration*

Article 9

3-2018

Thanking My Eight Secret Rabbis

Doug Shaw
University of Northern Iowa, doug.shaw@uni.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas>

Let us know how access to this document benefits you

Copyright ©2018 Doug Shaw

Recommended Citation

Shaw, Doug (2018) "Thanking My Eight Secret Rabbis," *UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity*. Vol. 13 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/universitas/vol13/iss1/9>

This Essays, Studies, and Works is brought to you for free and open access by UNI ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in UNiversitas: Journal of Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity by an authorized editor of UNI ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uni.edu.



Thanking My Eight Secret Rabbis

Part of the journal section “Essays, Studies, and Works”

Doug Shaw “Thanking My Eight Secret Rabbis”

Abstract

The author publicly thanks eight people who taught him valuable lessons, but who he cannot thank in person. He describes what he’s learned from a tale-spinning camp counselor, a stockboy, a dorm-mate with large testicles, a lady at a concert, a stranger at a strip-club, a UNI professor, a Legitimate Actor, and a true-life Jedi Master.

Introduction

1. My mom taught me to say “thank you” to people. I’m usually good about that. But I have eight secret rabbis that I haven’t thanked. I can’t - either I don’t know their names, or their unforgettable lessons would seem trivial or silly to them. As I get older, these unsent thank-yous get heavier, and I want to let them go. It is time for me to thank my rabbis.

Secret Rabbi #1: Larry from Wally - Y Day Camp

2. Larry was the “fun” camp counselor. He wasn’t mine. But he was the one who stood on the bus as we were taken to Lake Potawatomi in the morning and again as we rode home in the late afternoon, leading us in “I’ve Got Sixpence” and “Do Your Ears Hang Low” and “She’s a New Yorker” and the one about the hole in the nickel.

3. One day it rained, and all the campers, it seemed like thousands to me, all the individual “squads” with their names more interesting than my squad’s name (The Cubs), came together to sit on the floor of a big warehouse. In retrospect, I feel so sorry for the adults - what are you going to do with so many kids in a warehouse? I think they showed us a movie, I’m not sure... but at some point the camp director said, “Larry, entertain them.”

4. Without hesitating, Larry stood at the front of the warehouse, the other counselors shushed their squads, and Larry asked us if we’d be interested in how Lake Potawatomi got its name. I will tell you the story now, and please be aware that I believed every... single... word of it. As did most of the other campers, I’m sure.

5. Before the story started, Larry wanted to make sure that all of us knew what a watomi was. It turned out that most of us did not, so he explained that it is a North American aquatic bird that looks like a combination of a platypus and an ordinary duck, with thick fur like an otter. It can

live underwater for long periods at a time, like dolphins, and has a transparent stomach, so you can see its internal organs. That wasn't part of the story; that was just a fact.

6. So, ever since the time of the Indians, it was known that there was this... creature at the bottom of the lake. It was the size of a whale, some said even larger, and it resembled the common North American watomi. The word for "big" in the Indian language is "Pota" (rhymes with "dada") so they called the creature Pota-watomi meaning "Big watomi."

7. Now because it is so large, the Potawatomi cannot go out in the sun, because sunlight, even reflected off the ground, would burn its internal organs through its transparent stomach, so it could only come out - at night. Which it did. Because that is when it could eat. It would eat forest animals, of course, or... people.

8. Sometimes, a foolish person would swim in the lake. At which point the Potawatomi would swim up (the diffraction of the water prevented the sunlight from hurting its internal organs) and eat the person.

9. Oh - one question we'd kept asking our counselors, over and over again, was why there were seven Coke Cans suspended on sticks in the lake. They kept saying "I don't know." But Larry knew. Seven times in history, someone was foolish enough to go swimming in Lake Patowatomi. Each time he was eaten. And "they" put those Coke Cans up at the exact spots where each person got eaten.

10. So, all in all, we should remember to NEVER go swimming in the Lake, and NEVER EVER walk in the woods near the lake at night.

11. I thought this was amazingly cool knowledge to have, so after we were done "rolling rolling home" with our various amounts of pence I couldn't wait to tell my mom and big brother about it. I got them to sit in the same place at the same time, and I told them the whole story, just as I told you. And my mom and brother were trying so hard not to look amused as I said so seriously "NEVER go swimming in the Lake, and NEVER EVER walk in the woods near the lake at night." And as the words were coming out of my mouth, I realized that Larry had made the whole story up. (except the watomi part - that wasn't part of the story - that was real. Larry had said so.)

12. The next rain day, when Larry told us the story of why his "Jew-Fro" had been cut (it involved Russian spies and the lines, "You know, when they give you truth serum, you cannot lie. No matter what. It forces you to tell the truth. You must tell the truth and the complete truth unless you've had special training. Fortunately, I've had the training...") I knew he was making it up, but as he was telling it, I kind of believed it anyway.

13. That's what fascinated me. When he told the Potawatomi story, it seemed so plausible. And when I told it, it was so silly. Why was that? And that the start of my understanding of public speaking, that it matters how you say things, and how some people do it better than other people, and that there's a difference between a story told in a warehouse full of bored children who want to believe and the same story told to your mother and brother at a kitchen table.

14. It was a path that led to winning speech contests, to my beloved hobby of emceeing, to success in my jobs, and to telling stories to my daughter when we walked to Price Lab school, holding hands. It was a path that had another fork, that led to my skepticism of speakers who use pretty words and personal charisma as a substitute for proof or even solid definitions.

15. ...and it led me to singing songs like "I've Got Sixpence" and "Do Your Ears Hang Low?" on bus and car trips, without feeling the need for shyness and irony.

16. Thank you, Larry.

Secret Rabbi #2: The Stockboy Next Door

17. In high school, I worked for KMS of Greater Chicago, a supplier of fine hair-care products. We didn't sell to consumers; we sold to salons that sold to consumers. Our bosses, Maury and Madelon Sherman, were flamboyant giants. Madelon had tall hairstyles that never moved, a perfect middle-aged tan, bright nail polish, yellow or orange clothes, and makeup and lipstick and bejeweled glasses and eye shadow and a big smile when you walked in. Maury had a shirt unbuttoned enough so a cloud of gray chest hair showed, gold chains around his neck, a big wedding ring and another ring and a gold watch and sunglasses that darkened when he was outside and lightened when he was inside and and and and and.

18. It was Maury, Madelon, me, and John the full-time stockboy (who became Jay, then Mike, then Dan, then Mike again, then I went off to college.)

19. On the weekends, sometime around noon, the phone would ring and Madelon would announce, "It's Maury - he's on the road - he wants to know what we want for lunch. He's getting deli." Or Chinese. Or Italian. Not Indian - this was a long time ago, before Chicagoland discovered "Indian" as a thing. And we'd say what we wanted and 45 minutes later Maury would come in all giant and Santa-like and we'd stop working and John (then Jay Mike Dan Mike again) and I would go to the back and eat our lunch at the tiny table with Cokes from the fridge, and then back to work. Nobody was looking at a clock - we took much less than an hour - we were teenaged boys.

20. Appliance Parts was a machine-parts supplier next to KMS, and the owner came by sometimes, and got jealous because John and I were good Youth and hard workers. Sometimes John would do a shift or two for Appliance Parts, when the owner was between stockboys. And my brother Gordon worked for them on Saturdays, while I was working next door at KMS.

21. One Saturday, Gordon couldn't make it to his job, so I subbed for him at Appliance Parts. It felt a lot like being in an alternate-reality Sci-Fi story. The owner was like their Maury. They had their own version of Johnjaymikedanmikeagain. Gordon was their version of me. They were missing a Madelon, but she was the only one of us who could not be duplicated, so that made sense. I worked in the back, moving boxes of machine parts around instead of boxes of Nefa, Cleanse-Phree, ReMove, and other hair-care products. And then at noon, the owner said, "Lunch time!" Thank god. I was starving. Machine parts were heavier than shampoo.

22. And the older stockboy got an old coffee cup and filled it with water from the tap, and then went to the refrigerator and got out his sack-lunch. And I had nothing to eat. Because I assumed

- well you know what I assumed. Deli, Italian, or Chinese. (or Indian if it had been ten years later) I was hungry, but more than that, I was embarrassed. Because I had obviously made a moronic assumption, and now I had no lunch.

23. "What do you have?" he asked, curious.

24. "Oh - I don't eat lunch."

25. He took his lunch out. I tried to look as cool and casual as possible, standing as I sipped from my coffee-cup of water.

26. He didn't have a lot of lunch. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich, and potato chips. "You want half my sandwich?"

27. If he had had two, I would have taken one. I was really hungry. But no, this wasn't enough food for two. "No, it's okay." I was fifteen years old.

28. "C'mon, seriously." He said something like that. I wish I could remember his name. So I sat down and savored half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. And it tasted so good because I was hungry. And I tried to eat it slowly. As did he, it really wasn't a lot of food. And then we just sat there - he didn't get back to work, so I didn't either. Until 12:30 when the owner called out, "12:30, guys!" And we got back to work. I wasn't paid for that half-hour.

29. I learned what it was like to be too proud to ask to share, and how what's-his-name was able to share with me, without making it feel like he was offering charity. To a stranger. A stranger who had been a dumbass. I probably would have grown up to be a person who shared things anyway, I'm that kind of person, but he showed me how to do it well.

30. Thank you, Stockboy Next Door.

Secret Rabbi #3: Mike Schulze

31. Mike Schulze lived on my dorm floor, and was a big man. At least his balls were. Everyone on the floor had seen them at one point or another. I'd seen them when he walked into Ed's room, where a bunch of us were hanging out. He was just out of the shower, wearing a towel, and he noticed that Ed had a bucket at the other end of the room, where he kept his soap and toothbrush. "Man, I have to take a piss," said Mike. "I'll bet I could make it into that bucket." Ed did what a guy does when he's being teased, and didn't react. "Oh, you don't think I can?" Mike asked. "Okay, watch." And suddenly the towel dropped down, and there was Mike stark naked, holding his penis with two hands (because he needed to) and making the aiming motion everyone in the room knew well. "NO!" yelled Ed, as Mike laughed and picked up his towel.

32. Those who hadn't seen Mike's testicles had heard about them. From Mike. Because Mike sang in the shower. He was German/Italian, and had a wonderful opera singing voice. Several times a week, you'd be on the floor, and the shower in the middle of the living area would be going, and you'd hear songs from La Traviata or Giulio Cesare or Le Nozze di Figaro - I just looked up those names on Google; I have no idea if those were the actual operas. They were sometimes in Italian and sometimes in German. Picture a dorm floor full of 17 - 19 year old boys, silent, transfixed, enjoying an impromptu vocal concert, too cool to say anything about it

afterwards. Sometimes, when Mike was in a good mood or drunk, he would sing songs in English. About his balls. Like this one to the tune of the Mickey Mouse song: "MIC - KEY - BALLS! Mike's big balls! Mike's big balls! They always are the biggest of them all!"

33. Mike got away with his boasting, because he was hilariously confident, strong like a god, and had an unrivaled capacity for alcohol.

34. I wasn't like that. If you had to describe me with today's terms, it would be a Geek. But this was before the internet, and before Geek pride, and nobody called people Geeks except in sitcoms. I was who I was. When I was watching Doctor Who in the dorm lounge with the types of kids who would watch Doctor Who in a dorm lounge, I was fine. Bold and extroverted. I was the fun and funny guy. When I was hanging out in Ed's room with our group, I would be making jokes and laughing and all of that. I was confident when I was safe, but I wasn't always safe.

35. It was Friday night, late enough for all the drinking to have begun in earnest, and I wanted to ask Mike about something, I don't remember what, I didn't know him all that well, and I heard noise coming from his room and walked in and there - and there were the guys who didn't like me. All of them - maybe 20. Sitting along the walls, making a circle with one gap, the gap being where the door opened in, and I had just walked into it. What do I do now? Leave? How do you do that? How do you walk into a room smiling, stop smiling, turn around and leave? Or do you stay where you are obviously unwelcome? I was an impossible situation, at least for me, you may have known what to do.

36. "Hey, Mike, I just wanted to borrow a -"

37. "DOUGLAS! Have a drink!"

38. I looked at the faces of everyone. They didn't want me there. But I couldn't say "no" to the drink. Because Mike asked me. I (and I mean literally) can't picture what it would be like for someone to turn down a drink from Mike. So I took a bottle of cheap Scotch and poured only a little into the red Solo cup, so I could drink and get out. And I got ready to sit next to someone who didn't want me to sit next to me and would have to skootch. These guys had been talking about whatever real guys talk about on the floor of a dorm room, and I'm the type of guy who just now used the word "skootch."

39. "No! You are like a BROTHER to me!" To the guys now: "This man is like a BROTHER to me!" To me: "Sit next to me! Sit by Mike!" And I sat there, and had my drink, and put in a word or two as we talked about what real guys talk about on a dorm floor, and I quit when I was ahead.

40. You know, sometimes I'll be with a group of people and 4-person Scrabble, or Charades, or Euchre, or some other "partner" game that I'm good at will break out, and there will be one of the four who is clearly stressed or insecure. I make it a point to say, "I call Kayla! Kayla's my partner and we will destroy you!" And then we lose. Or then we win. And if there is another round I call out "Same partners! I'm not giving Kayla up!" Because I remember "This man is like a BROTHER to me!"

41. Thank you, Mike Schulze.

Secret Rabbi #4: The Lady in her Thirties at the Dead Concert

42. (Author's Note: Names have been changed to protect the innocent, and I feel compelled to point out that the statute of limitations has been reached and I don't touch the stuff any more). It was me and some friends, and we were juniors in college. I loved these people - at the time we were like family. And our future was like the future of some families - we would move all over the country, and some pairs of us would lose touch, and all that. But that was the future. This was the present, when I was surrounded by people that I loved and was almost completely sure loved me, which is as secure as I get. And we got into a car or two, and went to see the Greatful Dead, live. It was my first time - there were a total of two or three, each time with a subset of these people. Was it two, or three? It bothers me that I can't remember. Don't make the obvious joke; you are better than that.

43. We were seated on bleachers, and Jake was sitting on the right end of us, next to a stranger. I was in the middle of the seven of us, which made me happy. And we all suddenly wanted weed, and we didn't have any. It wasn't a big "ruin the concert!" thing, it was more like, "boy, it would be nice if we had some weed." But we didn't. And the lady to Jake's right had to get up and do something and needed someone to save her seat and watch her stuff. A small favor, the kind of favor you ask the nerdy college student next to you to do, knowing he will say "yes." Which he did. And she came back, and said "thank you."

44. She was older than us, in her thirties, with some friends in their thirties. They weren't flower children - they were regular-looking grownups who probably had ordinary jobs and owned no tie-dye, but enjoyed music and the Dead, and were happy to be at the show. But to us - to me - they were a possible answer to the big question college students have: Does growing up mean my friends and I have to lose this spark we have? And here were some honest to goodness grown-ups, still with the spark.

45. Our new friend thanked Jake, and I didn't hear exactly what happened next, I know she didn't say "Can I do anything in return?" or anything like that, but somehow he got a little shy and his eyes moved and it was conveyed that he was not high and he would like to be. And she said, and my auditory memory kicks in here, "Oh, would you like to smoke a joint?" And I remember feeling very Adult, even though it wasn't me she was talking to, because this grown woman asked one of Us that question so matter-of-factly, like we were peers with the thirty-year olds, that we weren't just nerdy college students majoring in computer science and engineering and physics. And Jake, god bless you Jake, you aren't a secret rabbi because you aren't Secret at all, you know how much you've influenced me, how much all of you in that group did, and Jake godblessyoujake said awkwardly, "well, I'm with my friends."

46. The next part I remember in slow motion. Her eyes went from Jake, to the person next to Jake, to the next person, to me, to the next person, etc. As it dawned on her how many people she was going to have to share her dope with if she said "yes." As she took in all of us looking at her, like puppy dogs when someone is holding a piece of beef jerky. And she reached into her purse, took out two joints, and handed them both to Jake, with a lighter.

47. What struck me (again, I was looking right at her face with my puppy dog eyes, and it was an expressive face, I believe I know what she was thinking at every point) was that even though this was not something she expected or wanted, there was not a single moment of considering saying "no." It was clear that sharing her weed when someone was out was something she did. And while weed is off the table these days, back when it wasn't, I never let someone run dry while I had some. Never once. Because I remembered.

48. Thank you, Lady at the Dead Concert. Wherever you are, may you never run out. And if you do, may some kids like us be there to tide you over.

Secret Rabbi #5: The Guy in the Parking Lot

49. So one October evening in grad school we went to a strip club. Other people had talked about it, and the three of us had never been, and we didn't like that we'd never been, so we went to Detroit - Jim and Andy in Jim's car, me in mine. And we tipped with our dollar bills and got a lap dance each with our 20s and Jim got a second with another 20, and there were all these naked ladies everywhere and one of them sat on my lap. I don't know why she chose my lap. Maybe because we were clearly having such a great time and yet we were so harmless, I have no idea. Maybe she thought she would get 20s. But she sat there and said hello and there was this awkward silence. A naked lady that I didn't even know was sitting on my lap, she was about to get bored and I couldn't think of a thing to say. Then Jim said to her, "What are you going to be for Halloween!" Brilliant! She brightened up and described the cat costume she made, and Jim talked about a Halloween costume he had worn once and Andy chimed in and the four of us had a conversation except I didn't say anything until she asked what I was thinking and I said "I just don't want you ever to get off my lap" which was evidently funny so it was all fine and then when she did get up Jim gave her money, and that meant the etiquette must be to give her money so Andy and I did too, and that was that. And Jim and Andy left and I had some more dollar bills so I said I was going to stay a little longer until they were gone.

50. The vibe was different when I was alone. I felt guilty and strange now. Somehow I went from a being a tourist to being a patron when they left. But I stayed until my dollar bills were gone, because the ladies were naked. And the sky was dark when I left, and the parking lot was dark when I left, and my headlights were dark when I left, except they weren't. They were on, and not exactly on, because a lot of time had passed, but there was a faint glow. And of course the car didn't start.

51. And I was in the parking lot of a Detroit strip club. Not a place where people hang out and help start your car. And I just stood there. This was before cell phones. I would have to use their pay phone. Call a friend? "Hi, I'm calling from a strip club an hour or so away on a school night, can you get me?" No. "Hi, road-service? I'm standing here at a strip club pay phone, can you come jump my car?" Do you KNOW how embarrassing that would be? And I had an empty wallet. But there was nothing else to be done, except that a car pulled in right next to me and the guy who offered me a jump didn't even crack a smile. He knew what he was doing, my car was running in five minutes.

52. "I wouldn't turn it off for an hour or so - let it charge up good," he said.

53. I took out my wallet, “Thank you so much. Can I at least buy you a lap dance?” In my stress, I’d forgotten there was no money in my wallet.

54. “Nah. How much are they?” he asked.

55. “Twenty dollars.”

56. “Worth it?”

57. “I don’t know.” I had nothing to compare it to. I took out a twenty dollar bill. I know I just told you my wallet was empty. I remember it being empty. But I also remember holding out a twenty dollar bill. “Please, let me buy you one.”

58. “Nah - get home safe.”

59. It was literally five minutes of effort on his part, but he saved me so much... you know. And he wouldn’t take my money. And he didn’t laugh. Am I always a Good Samaritan? No. Am I often a Good Samaritan? Yes. Particularly when I see someone stuck in a Predicament. Because I will never remember that horrible feeling when I was evaluating my options, and what it felt like when he pulled up in the space next to mine, and starting getting his jumper cables out before he had finished asking me if I needed help.

60. Thank you, guy in the strip-club parking lot.

Secret Rabbi #6: Roger Sell

61. When I came to the University of Northern Iowa, probably before you did, I knew it wouldn’t be long before I met the director of the Center for Enhancement of Teaching, Roger Sell. At my previous home, I’d been active in the Center for Learning and Teaching Research, and at the one before that it was the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. There aren’t that many permutations of the words. Roger was eager to meet me, because he knew of my work on SGIDs.

62. An SGID is a Small Group Instructor Diagnosis. Not important to this story. But contact Susan Hill if you want to have one done in your class; they are awesome.

63. My UNI position was (and is) my first job as a tenure-track professor. Important to this story.

64. As we made conversation, he mentioned that he’d written a paper on SGIDs, but hadn’t sent it off for publication yet. He asked if I would like to read it, and I said I would. So he printed a copy for me, and I read it with a pen in my hand, because that’s what I do with unpublished papers. And I wrote on it. And I wrote more. I started with crap like deleting “very”s, but then after I got into it, I got deeper into it, and then even deeper. He was writing about something I knew something about, and that I cared about, and I liked the paper enough to get into very intense edit mode.

65. Roger and I only had met that one time, and he was Established, so when I gave his paper back to him, with my handwriting all over the thing, I apologized for being so critical. He laughed, and asked if I would read the next draft. I agreed to. The next draft was titled, “Fine-

Tuning the In-Class Interview: The Content, Process, Reporting, and Use of SGIDs” by G. Roger Sell and Douglas J. Shaw. He had listed me as a co-author. “But I didn’t co-author this paper!” I objected. “You did great work on it, and you are going to do more,” he said. And I did. By the time we sent it off, I’d almost earned the credit he’d given me.

66. My previous job was as a post-doc at the University of Minnesota under a professor who took all the credit he could, and was all too willing to separate other peoples’ names from the work that they did. I came to UNI assuming that was the way the game was played. Roger showed me another way. Roger showed me that tenured professors could be generous to non-tenured professors, that they could help them to succeed. That they could make them feel welcome and part of a sharing community.

67. Our paper didn’t get published in the end. But I never forgot what it felt like to see my name on that second draft. And I’m still earning the credit Roger gave me, by trying to be generous with people I work with, by being a good example as he was. I’m a better academic, and a better person because of that second draft.

68. Thank you, Roger Sell.

Secret Rabbi #7: Legitimate Actor David Mann

69. I was a regular cast member of a variety show in Minneapolis, and David Mann was our special guest star two or three times. So here was my relationship with David Mann: We’d chatted a bit in the green room, were on stage together several times, and once both went to a day-after-the-show brunch with the cast and their moms. (We were good daughters and sons, and it was Mother’s Day) Because he was in Actor’s Equity, and the rest of us were not, he was always billed as, and referred to as, “Legitimate Actor David Mann.” I see his name come up on Facebook, and always use the complete phrase in my head.

70. A few years later, Laurel and I went to see a production of *Much Ado about Nothing* that he directed. It was fantastic. Usually I have to try to like Shakespeare, and I sometimes succeed. But this time, no effort was involved. The acting, the costumes, the staging, the ... everything made it laugh-out-loud enjoyable. At the end, where the actors traditionally come out and bow, there was a dance number instead, and the actors danced and bowed in character. Wonderful.

71. After the show, Laurel and I were chatting with fellow audience members. In a rare display of luck on the social competence front, I raved about the closing dance to a woman who turned out to be its choreographer. Yay! And there he was, at the other end of the room. I wanted to go over and talk to him, because I was all excited about what a great show it was, and because I hadn’t seen him for three years, and wanted to say “hi” again, even though there was a chance he didn’t remember who I was. But I didn’t, because he was surrounded by Important Looking People, at least one of whom had a notepad out. These were clearly press and donors, and he was being charming. I wasn’t going to interrupt that by saying, “Hi. We knew each other three years ago. Your show was good.”

72. So Laurel and I mingled, chatting with people, and suddenly, I heard a voice yelling from across the room. "DOUG SHAW!" And Legitimate Actor David Mann was walking across the room, leaving the Important Looking People behind for a moment. "I'm so glad you came! How are you? Hey, Laurel! How are you two enjoying Iowa?" I felt so special. It was a great feeling. He didn't have to do that, and he did.

73. I'm not a Legitimate Actor. Some days I feel like I'm not a Legitimate Anything. But there have been times that I've been in ... circumstances - I've been a keynote speaker at more than one conference. I've emceed shows with large audiences. I've been at a victory party for an election that I won. I've received the occasional award. So yes, I've had clusters of strangers around me, who want to talk to me, who are Good For My Career. And I can hear David's voice calling "DOUG SHAW!" and I make damn sure that I find my friends first, and greet them first, because I remember.

74. Thank you, Legitimate Actor David Mann

Secret Rabbi #8: The Jedi Master

75. Laurel and I were waiting in a 3 day line for tickets to Phantom Menace. Yes, yes, I know. So you had a group of people sleeping in tents in a parking lot, who all had something weird in common, Star Wars fanaticism, but were otherwise complete strangers, with nothing to do but get to know each other. So we did. Serious conversations, light conversations, and lots and lots and LOTS of joking around.

76. A bunch of us were sitting in a circle on day 3 and I am who I am and said something strange and irrelevant. And one of the people, who was younger than all of us, dressed in Jedi robes, laughed and said, "Now that's why we love Doug - because he will out of the blue say the weirdest shit" and everyone laughed, including me. They were laughing with me, not at me, and in retrospect it was a flattering thing for him to say.

77. Here's the thing - he could have gotten just as big a laugh with "That's Doug - he will out of the blue say the weirdest shit" or "You know, Doug, you'd be nearly human if you weren't always out of the blue saying the weirdest shit" - I had left myself open for a multitude of kinds of mockery. Any phrase he said in front of "out of the blue say the weirdest shit" would have made sense, semantically, and gotten the laugh. And he didn't go for the teasing insult. He went for making it into a complement. "That's why we love Doug" - He had the option to get a laugh out of a Burn, and instead he went for getting the laugh out of a complement. ...as I try to do to this day. Comedy doesn't have to hurt. The spoiler-averse high school student Jedi changed me for the better.

78. Thank you, my Jedi master.

79. Once upon a time, I totally misunderstood a Cabbalistic legend about secret rabbis. Neil Gaiman misunderstands it in Sandman #31, and Robert Fulghum alludes to it in All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten. You can even argue that the idea overlaps with Bokonist thought in Kurt Vonnegut's Breakfast of Champions. I don't believe that God has sent certain people into the world to be secret teachers to people. Or maybe we all are secret teachers,

or have the potential to be. But I will always be grateful to these eight secret rabbis, and all the ones I've forgotten, and those I haven't encountered yet.

Acknowledgement

Thanks go to Jackie Gruenwald for her comments and feedback.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

