

**Musings on My Master's**  
**Tom Robles, M.Ad.Ed., 2008**

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With much relief, and after nine drafts, I finally submitted an acceptable version of my thesis and passed. I never expected it to take so long to finish. The last few months were especially challenging, because my ability to take an objective stance was increasingly obscured by the many revisions I was making on the document. Its completion now provides the distance I need to reflect on my graduate experience as a whole. Completing this degree has been affirming. Not only did it open doors to new ways of thinking and perceiving, the experience proved that I could do it, despite my relative inexperience as an academic.

Embarking on the degree, however, was challenging from the beginning, given the life transitions I was going through at the time. First, within a month of starting my studies, my beloved grandmother died, and I had to cope with maintaining a balance between meeting my emotional needs and my professional and academic obligations. The experience compelled me to tap into the perseverance of character I'd previously cultivated as a child emigrant to Canada and as an English teacher living abroad. Second, nine months after starting the degree, I decided to re-locate to Toronto, believing that doing so would expand my professional and social opportunities. I no longer felt Winnipeg to be the nurturing, comfortable place I'd once felt at home in: I'd simply changed too much. Third, ten months after re-locating, I met my partner, and underwent the tumult, both dismal and exhilarating, which accompanies such a profound change.

As in my personal life, change and transformation were recurrent in my graduate experience. Previous attitudes and beliefs about how to study, how to conduct research, and how to write were greatly altered, influenced by new approaches; new philosophies; and new colleagues, educators, and friends.

A minor challenge involved adjusting to the academic life. Being accustomed to and preferring a more sequential approach to working, I had to learn to be a multi-tasker, juggling my studies with the other priorities in my life, including teaching, volunteering, and socializing. Life became somewhat regimented, but in an odd way, compartmentalizing my days into hours rationed to specific activities was, in its predictability, also reassuring. I discovered an inherent fastidiousness that served me well in managing my time as well as in my approach to studying.

A major challenge was writing. Days or weeks would pass when ideas weren't forthcoming, resulting in great anxiety, compounded by the isolation inherent in the writing process and the nature of the distance education format. But I learned that these periodic dearths and disappointments were contingent in nature and not to take them too seriously. I don't know how this worked. Maybe it was partly due to the rigorous self-reflection I engaged in when I felt stymied. But it usually wasn't long before inspiration would return, seemingly effortlessly leading to the appropriate information or knowledge. Then, as the focus of my studies became more evident, and as the formless began to take shape, my progress became more consistent, and I came to feel less anxious. I discovered the benefits of early morning writing when my mind was clearest and keeping a journal of my learning journey. The latter not only helped to organize my thoughts, but also proved therapeutic. Doing so allowed me to vent constructively.

Venting, as much as I hated it, often led to the recognition that the motivation to start any task proved the biggest hurdle, the surmounting of which could lead to hours of engrossing work. More importantly, venting and self-reflection taught me to anticipate potential obstacles, which in turn, helped to mitigate them. Both also helped me cope with the feelings of hopelessness, futility about, and desire to expedite progress that periodically plagued me. Allowing these feelings to play themselves out in my mind refined the ability to distinguish between my fears and the still voice that reassured.

Much as my thesis did, undergoing this five-year journey provided insights into what I was capable of. As in my personal life, surmounting its various stages has been a test of my sense of security. I constantly questioned whether I could do a good job, could get through the rest of the program, or whether upon graduation I could get a well-paying job. Exhausting as they could get, questioning, venting, and self-reflecting often led to catharsis and to a greater sense of self. In these ways, I learned to overcome.