MEMO

TO: Dr. Shirley Mullen, Provost
   and the Westmont College Faculty Development Committee
FR: Dr. Randall VanderMey, Professor of English
DATE: April 27, 2006

RE: Report on Sabbatical Leave for Fall, 2004

THE CONTEXT OF MY SABBATICAL PROPOSAL

The sabbatical report I submitted in January 30, 2004, came on the heels of my return from co-leading the Europe Semester in Fall, 2003. I had put most other professional research and writing on hold for the previous year in order to help administer the program and to prepare to co-teach four courses in Europe, including three that I had not taught on campus before. I came back in Spring 2004 tucker out from our adventures in Europe but committed to teaching the normal load of courses on campus. On my previous sabbatical leave, in 1997-98, I had spent time completing a novel and numerous poems, reading toward a proposed new course in visionary world literature, and working with a team of three other writers to produce the first edition of a composition textbook called The College Writer to be published by Houghton Mifflin. I had also continued to serve on campus as the faculty adviser to the Horizon, as a member of the Communications Board and as the chair of a task force subcommittee on standards for written and Oral Communication at Westmont. I had spent "too much time on campus," some said, and I tended to agree. This time I was committed to staying truly away.

By the time of my proposal in January 2004, The College Writer and its various electronic supplements had come out early, before the official 2004 copyright date, and had begun to create a buzz in the industry. Thirty thousand copies had sold in the first half year. The sales force was excited about getting it into classrooms across the country. And Houghton Mifflin had signed contracts with the author team for three new books: 1) a research writing guide, 2) a new comb-bound composition handbook for use in college across the curriculum and at all class levels, and 3) an anthology of readings with critical thinking apparatus. The other authors and I had doled out the tasks according to our individual interests and set about with lots of support personnel to bring the books into being.

WHAT I PLANNED TO DO

My proposal in January 2004 sounded reasonable and good to me when I wrote it. I said I wanted to have a half-time appointment for the whole 2004-2005 academic year, teaching two courses in Fall 2004 and one in Spring 2005. Over the course of that year I wanted to work with the same author team as for The College Writer to create a companion textbook, an anthology of readings to be called The College Reader. In addition, I proposed to contribute, in an editorial and advisory capacity, to another companion volume, to be called The College Writer's Handbook. In addition, I proposed to revise my own collected poems, send them out individually for publication, gather them into a volume to be titled Cease and Persist, and to strive to land a publisher for it. Finally, I committed myself to revising my unpublished novel, Diamond Lane, on the basis of remarks I had received after the first round of rejections and to make a second concerted effort to get it published.

Anything else I accomplished during the year, I figured, would be gravy.
WHAT I REALLY DID

Two things happened in the spring of 2004 to give my plans a different spin. In February, the Provost’s office—thank you, Shirley—named my 24-poem song cycle Kenosis, as set to music by Steve Butler, as the college’s nominee for the Arlin G. Meyer Prize from the Lilly Foundation, in response to my formal application. To be eligible for the prize, I had to put on a public presentation of Kenosis before the end of the year. Thus, I became the producer for a one-time only production of the full musical treatment of the song cycle. I submitted a grant proposal to a local foundation but was turned down. I did not receive the Arlin G. Meyer Prize, either, but I went ahead and produced the program anyway, with considerable funding assistance from the Provost’s office. We had a marvelous concert before an intimate but appreciative crowd downtown at the Center Stage Theater on December 3, 2004.

The second change of plan came with my department’s request, in April, that I consider taking the whole sabbatical in the Fall rather than spreading it over the full year. I agreed. But I also agreed that in Spring, 2005, I would teach journalism for the first time, to replace Marcia Meier, with the assumption that I would also take her place as newspaper adviser in 2005. Thus, I spent part of my sabbatical working up a new course in journalism to offer in Spring, 2005. In a related task, I actively oversaw the journalism internship of a student at the South Coast Beacon.

After graduation, with the rest of the year now completely free of teaching obligations, I jumped immediately into revising poems. Along the way I wrote a few more as well. By the middle of the summer I had worked my way through 120 of my poems, eliminating some and revising the rest. Eventually I organized the 80 most publishable ones into two volumes, one named Cease and Persist as planned, and the other named Crème Brulee. I also took some time out to help judge the Barbara Mandigo Kelly poetry contest for the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. Meanwhile, I was revising my 30-page academic paper, “Desiring in Faith and the Ethics of Reading,” for publication in a Canadian anthology called The Smorgasbord of Postmodernity, a collection of Christian scholarly articles on an array of topics in literary theory. I have since learned that the Canadian government subvention that would have permitted the publication to occur was not granted, so the search for a publisher of that collection goes on, now, frustratingly, in about its fourth year.

Toward the end of June, I had not sent out any poems for publication yet and was about to begin working on a major revision of my novel Diamond Lane when it became clear that the decline in health of my mother-in-law, Retta Pearthie, was accelerating. Everything in our family then began to circle around the management of her health and living situation at Maravilla. On July 15, she died. We were there at Cottage Hospital to share in that profound event. And then life for awhile was all about managing grief and putting together the pieces of a fairly complicated estate. I channeled some of my energies into installing new vinyl-clad retrofit windows on all sides of my house, with the help of a contractor friend. And I put some other energies into weekly rounds of golf.

The biggest counterbalance to grief came just ten days after my mother-in-law’s funeral when, on July 25, my stepson Jason married his girlfriend Martha in the Rose Garden of the Mission. Plans for memorial services overlapped with wedding plans in uncannily profound ways. And then about two months after the wedding, Jason and Martha became parents of a baby girl, Jasmine Marie, making Dana and me into grandparents for the first time. The reader will no doubt do the arithmetic, but only another grandparent will be able
to calculate the healing effects of this timely and healthy delivery. Dana and I experienced more joy by having the chance to attend eight weddings of friends, relatives, and former students over about a nine-week period in late summer.

As our lives curled back toward normal and as the college's fall semester began, I turned my attention away from revision of my own creative work and began working in earnest on the Houghton Mifflin projects I referred to above. But these projects, too, were altered in the process. As it turned out, the popularity of The College Writer, known in the trade now as "VanderMey," required it to be put on a two-year revision cycle, and the author team that created it went to work with a team of editors to make the substantial changes in the second edition happen.

Our first priority, however, was the bigger project, The College Writer's Handbook, which was designed to be used by student writers across the curriculum and at all grade levels at two-year and four-year colleges and universities. My role in the project involved keeping up a constant stream of correspondence with other authors and editors while writing chapters that were specifically assigned to me. I set the tone and critical thinking standards for the book by writing the first five chapters: "Critical Thinking Through Reading," "Critical Thinking in Writing," "Critical Thinking Through Visual Images," "Understanding Argument and Persuasion," and "Assessing Writing." These, after undergoing severe editing to meet the demands of our graphic designers, have come to constitute the first 50 pages of the book. In addition, I took on myself the task of writing the six key chapters on Grammar (Nouns, Verbs, and Other Parts of Speech), Sentence Basics, Using Phrases, and Using Clauses. Two other writers on the team worked with editors to adapt, extend, write and revise the remaining chapters in the book.

As all of this was going on, the author team found it difficult to collaborate to that same degree on the reader and other handbooks that are in the works. I found myself dissatisfied with the committee-like tone of the anthology of readings that was described in our contract. I agreed to take on that project as my own special care. During the fall, I bought about 85 books and began to sift them for passages that would make valuable additions to the reader. Since then I have renamed the anthology The Contrary Reader, written two 45-page introductory chapters on critical thinking, chosen all the readings and completed the about 10% of the critical thinking apparatus to accompany the readers. That project awaits completion this summer.

THE IMPACT OF THE SABBATICAL

I am grateful to the Faculty Development Committee and the Provost for entrusting to me this amount of unencumbered time. The importance of the sabbatical to me lies not so much in what I did as in what became of me over time. As a result of the unexpected events I've described—the grief, the ceremonies, the play, the rejoicing over new birth—life itself regained some of its proper place in my life. My own mortality seems a more salient fact about me than anything I might say or do, or write. I'm a grandpa now, and I wasn't before the sabbatical. Consequently, I have more reason to leave space for others, and for joy in others, than I had before. I feel as if the clock has been turned back and in some ways I'm starting over, with rubber ducks.

In my professional life, a new franchise has opened up. They call the franchise "VanderMey" but by it they mean not me but a book. That feels strange. And I don't like getting caught up in an eternal cycle of new editions, even if to some that would spell success. But for the time being I'm willing to ride that publishing wave for the sake of the good it can accomplish. Textbook publishing has led to webcasts, conference presentations,
panel discussions, college-wide WAC training programs, consultations, keynote addresses, and hosts of new acquaintances across the country. I’m enjoying it. And benefiting. I’m bringing to the books things that are born right here in our classrooms. And I’m enriching my classes with ideas that have developed from the making of books. Specifically, writing handbooks and teaching writing has made me interested in the lively debates surrounding so-called “genre theory.” For several years I’ve been adding something to that discussion without even knowing it, every time I engage my students more deeply in thought about the “moves” we make as we write, as opposed to the fixed forms we adopt. It’s become something of a mild obsession with me, to the point where I’m beginning to feel a new book proposal coming on. The next time I do a sabbatical report, I suspect I’ll have more to say about that. But first, I have a reader to complete. And some poems to publish. And a novel. And a granddaughter, Jasmine Marie, to play with on the floor.