Dr. Dennis Thompson  

Since retiring as Professor of English and English for Academic Purposes in 2007, I have often reflected on my father, Max Thompson, and my relationship with him. Unfortunately, he didn’t have as long as I have already had to reap the benefits of the seeds he had sown and the joy that comes with seeing his grandkids grow up.

In my twilight years, I find myself reflecting on the beginnings of MCC and the life-changing effects it has had on such a large number of people. My connection with the College started long before any of you had heard of it, as I listened to my parents’ conversations around our kitchen table in the early 50s about the struggles of public education. I was strongly influenced by the way they wanted every student to have a chance to live a productive life. As the superintendent of the Van Dyke Public School District, my dad’s dream was to bring higher education to students of his lower socio-economic school district, whose families had no college experience and couldn’t imagine how their children could get one.

Max could sympathize with them because of a similar family background: not much money and no college experience. He had lost his father when he was 18 months old, had seen his mother take in laundry to buy groceries, and had worked on a railroad crew after high school because he couldn’t pay for college. However, to make a long story short, his mother had a college dream for him. One day after work, he found his bags packed and learned that he was heading to Alma College!

In the early 1950s Max supplemented tuition for a number of special students from Lincoln High School to get them started in college, but this couldn’t bring the widespread results that he dreamed of. He reasoned that if he couldn’t get a significant number of students in his district into college, he would bring the college to them!

When the majority of school administrators in Macomb County rejected his radical idea of creating a college in our own backyard, he headed to Washington and Lansing to get money and then pulled together the few administrators and friends from finance and law who liked his idea, most of whom had played poker in our basement for years, to design and create the blueprint that led to opening the doors of South Macomb Community College in 1954! Actually, from 8:00 am. to 3:00 pm., they were the doors of Lincoln High School in Max’s school district. When the high school students left at 3:00, college students moved in for classes from 3:00 to 11:00 pm.

Most of you never knew the source or depth of my passion to contribute to a program for developmental education (ECD, commonly known as Basic Ed); to teach those ENGL 0050 and ENGL 1000 classes; or to create a program of English for Academic Purposes to help foreign-born students gain competence in academic English. The source of this lifetime commitment came from two specific values that I internalized from my parents: first, education is for everyone, not only for the well-heeled; and second, always look for the best in everyone! When I graduated with an MA in English from U of M in 1966, Macomb County Community College, as it was called then, was the only institution of higher education in the Midwest with a program specifically aimed at helping the developmental student. It remained a highly successful program until Dad passed in 1971! I feel safe to say it is missed and honored by all of us who taught in the program and the students who learned from the dedicated faculty.

Following the painful death of Basic Ed, I’m glad I channeled my interest and experience in developmental education into a Ph.D. program at MSU. I learned early in my career that I had no desire to follow my father’s shift from teaching to administration, but I truly enjoyed learning and implementing more effective methods of making learning objectives clear to students and assessing what they learn.

At this stage of life, my family is the most dear to me! Nancy and I celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary in
the Julian Alps this past summer. Since son Steve and family live in Osaka, and daughter Susan and family live near Boulder, CO, we enjoy infrequent, but extended vacations and share daily and weekly activities by Skype with 13-year-old identical twins, Cali and Ella, and 6-year-old Juli.

Even though the Parkinson’s card I was dealt in 2002 prevents me from tying an artificial fly on the end of a trout line, retirement has brought me time for many things I can do and want to do! Balancing the meds, staying active—both mentally and physically—eating sensibly, and keeping a positive attitude are keys to playing this demanding game; so far, I’m still on the field!

One of these enjoyable activities is searching and sourcing family history, even though it’s sometimes embarrassing! We have visited many cemeteries in the US and Canada and searched files in genealogical libraries in Ottawa, Toronto, Dublin, Edinburg, and London and numerous not-so-well known locations! I have lots of encouragement from our kids to write autobiographical and biographical sketches of ancestors to pass on to future generations.

I also feel good about putting songs I composed many years ago (but just kept in my head) into proper form so future generations can play and sing them. Music has always been a big part of my life, and I get great pleasure from playing the piano, guitar, and several other instruments. Parkinson’s hasn’t kept me from playing every day when I’m home and heeding the call of pianos and guitars in homes, restaurants, museums, and hotel lobbies as we travel. In addition, several times a year I enjoy playing relaxing piano music for visitors and patients in the main lounge of the University of Michigan Hospital.

My favorite activity since retirement has been traveling to other countries with Nancy, my spouse and a travel planner par excellence. Pushed by a song we heard when we were dating in high school (“Faraway Places”) and a movie (“Bucket List”), our wanderlust has taken us to 45 countries, as well as all fifty states. Notable experiences include crossing a river in Thailand on the back of an elephant, viewing the Sahara Desert from the back of a camel, trying to understand the mysteries of Angor Wat in Cambodia at sunset and sunrise, and navigating Viet Nam’s Mekong River in a small boat. We have also been awed by the spectacular beauty of the Julian Alps in Slovenia and the waterfalls in Plitvice National Park in Croatia; jolted by the incredible pain of Auschwitz, near Krakow; astounded by the gigantic buildings left by the Romans, such as the aqueduct in Segovia, Spain, and the arena (colosseum) in Pula, Croatia; and delighted by feasting on gourmet cuisine in every country!

On the horizon, we really look forward to taking the twins to London with Phil Barrons’ annual trip in March, and Peru is in the planning stage for fall.

For some of our travel we have hooked up with small groups (with a maximum of 12) for land-only trips. As a consequence of my issues with spatial relationships, which began at birth, I’ve learned to trust Nancy’s gifts of planning and organizing, skills that have allowed us to travel independently and live locally with the help of friendships we have made along the way. As members of Servas, an organization whose purpose is “to promote peace by fostering understanding between people from different countries and cultures,” we are often invited to stay in people’s homes. When we’re home, we also host travelers passing through our area.

Sometimes our travel can have an unusual effect. This happened in 2011 when we spent three months in Spain, Portugal, and Morocco and learned about the many centuries of conflict involving Christians, Muslims, and Jews. To avoid depression brought on by the vivid realization of the slaughter of human beings over the centuries and to maintain my sanity as I waded through history, I decided to transform the stories of discrimination, hated, war, and genocide into a poem with a specific meter and a difficult rhyme pattern. The therapy worked, and a ten-page poem about these three major religions rolled out of me!