

“The Glass Castle” – Reflections, Tasks, and Projects

Wayne Smith, Ph.D.

Department of Management

U100 Instructor

[updated: Thursday, July 21, 2011]

Preface

This document is intended to help U100 instructors and others use the Glass Castle book in many practical ways. This document embraces and extends Ronit Sarig’s (and others’) documents from early in Spring, 2011. See:

<http://www.csun.edu/afye/Glass-Castle-Workshops.html>

The ideas in this document are organized loosely by “College” at CSUN, and within a discipline, the ideas are listed in no particular order. These ideas can be useful for cohort-based U100 sections, or for assignments that are aligned with other courses that the students are taking. These ideas are then followed by some “Interdisciplinary” ideas at the end. (Note: I apologize for inadvertently leaving out the College of Health and Human Development—clearly, this memoir is directly relevant to the curriculum in that college.)

Discipline-based Ideas

1. Humanities

- 1.1. Jeannette and Brian attend “Emerson [Elementary]” school in Phoenix. Who is this school named after? What themes did this person write about? Draw analogies between Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” and the plight of the Walls family.
- 1.2. The cat that is thrown out the window in the desert is named “Quixote”. Summarize Cervantes’ famous book with a similar name. Do you think the cat’s name was chosen by accident?
- 1.3. One of the most famous American novels is F. Scott’s Fitzgerald’s “Great Gatsby”. Jay Gatsby is wealthy and owns a large number of books in his office/study—all of them topped with a layer of dust. Why do Jay Gatsby’s books have dust on them? What does this mean, especially as it portends to the rest of the story in Gatsby? Compare and contrast Gatsby’s socio-economic status and intellectual acumen with the Walls family’s. Between Jay Gatsby and Rex Walls, who is more educated? Who is more informed? Who has more practical experience? How do each make decisions? Who is more ethical?

- 1.4. In Phoenix, Jeannette proclaimed proudly to the teacher that she had read all of the “Little House” series of books. Compare and contrast Jeannette’s childhood with Laura Ingalls Wilder’s as penned in the “Little House” series of books.
- 1.5. In Battle Mountain, Rose Mary reads [William] Faulkner and [James] Michener, but admits that the latter isn’t “real literature.” What is “real literature?” and who in society makes such judgments?
- 1.6. The title of the book is “The Glass Castle”. In your view, is this title an analogy, a simile, or a metaphor (or something else altogether). Justify your perspective with at least two pieces of evidence drawn from the text.
- 1.7. Provide an alternate title to this book. Argue with merit, logic, and passion for your title instead of Jeannette’s. In the book publishing business, who makes these kinds of decisions? What are the editorial processes and economic considerations involved?
- 1.8. This book is self-described as “A Memoir”. Presumably, most of the story is factual, but perhaps some of it is not. Which parts of the book do you take literally? Which parts of the book do you take apocryphally? Provide at least two examples of each. What is your own first childhood memory? How do you know how much of your own first childhood memory is accurate?
- 1.9. In Phoenix, Rex speaks up in church and occasionally argues with the Pastor at St. Mary’s church. Based upon Rex’s comments, do you think he is a Christian, a Roman Catholic, an agnostic, an atheist, or something else? Although this is the subject matter of Religion, be prepared to defend your position with logic and objectivity. Bonus: Can we study Religion scientifically?
- 1.10. Near the end of the book, Jeannette describes her Dad as an “entrepreneur” and her mother as an “artist.” Do you believe these descriptions are accurate? If so, why? If not, what other nouns, or perhaps adjectives in front the existing noun descriptions, would you add? Why?

2. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*

- 2.1. American history, particularly in the post-reconstruction era (~1890s), is characterized by human movements “to go West” and human movements from “rural” townships to “urban” cities. What types of individuals are drawn to one type of migration or the other? Support your thesis with ideas from the book.
- 2.2. A famous professor, Abraham Maslow, once proposed a theory of human motivation that has come to be known as “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs.” This theory suggests that motivation works by satisfying lower-level needs first, and then satisfying higher-level needs later. The order of needs is “physiological” (e.g.,

food, shelter, water), “safety” (e.g., physical security and overall well-being), “social” (e.g., a sense of belonging and finding love), “esteem” (e.g., self-worth, achievement, and respect), and “self-actualization” (e.g., goal definition, creativity, and a moral life). Describe one or more vignettes for two different characters in the book that best illustrates one or more steps of Maslow’s Hierarchy? Bonus: Describe a vignette in the book that best illustrates a movement of a character along the hierarchy (i.e., from a lower-level to a higher-level).

- 2.3. The Walls family, at least initially, named their various vehicles. Identify at least one strength and at least one weakness of naming a vehicle. Why did the Walls stop naming their vehicles?
- 2.4. In Phoenix, the Walls family first stayed at the “LBJ” apartments, and Jeannette would soon learn to know for whom it was named (and it’s *not* Lori, Brian, and Jeannette). Who was “LBJ”? What stance did his administration have on poverty? Was his policy effective?
- 2.5. Bobby Kennedy spoke on the CSUN campus in 1968 shortly before his assassination at a downtown Los Angeles hotel. What was Bobby Kennedy’s campaign position on poverty? During his campaign, how did Bobby Kennedy learn and teach himself about poverty? What kind of family did Bobby and his brothers John and Edward (a fourth brother died in WWII) come from?
- 2.6. Are there any “everyday heroes” in this book? How do you know? Are there any individuals who would might be an “everyday hero” if she or he simply made one major decision differently? From your own life experiences, are heroes “born” or “made”? Explain.
- 2.7. Jeannette and Brian are obviously very close and mutually supportive. Identify all of the ways that these two siblings are close and mutually supportive.
- 2.8. When Maureen is born, Jeannette says that “she will take care of her forever.” In what ways does she take care of her, and in what ways might Jeannette have done a better job? What constraints does Jeannette face in “taking care of her forever?”
- 2.9. In Phoenix, the neighborhood gypsies steal Brian’s pogo-stick from the Walls back yard. Also in Phoenix, Rose Mary steals a couple of dresses from a local thrift store. How are these situations similar; how are these situations different? What logic does Rose Mary use to get the gypsy family to return the pogo-stick? What logic does Rose Mary use to explain the theft of dresses to Jeannette?
- 2.10. In Welch, the community swimming pool appears not to be “formally segregated” (i.e., by statutory law), but rather “informally segregated” (i.e., by social convention). Compare and contrast these two situations. Does formal segregation

exist anywhere in the U.S.? Does formal segregation exist in other countries? Does informal segregation exist in the U.S.? Provide an example of the latter using first-person observation and experience.

- 2.11. In Phoenix, exams for eyes and ears are done at school. In fact, Lori's glasses were paid for by the school. In Welch, Jeannette knew that braces for her teeth were very expensive, and neither she nor her family were likely to be able to afford them. What kinds of personal care and/or medical care should be provided by a school? Write a policy justification for a school district supporting a position one way or the other. Consider technological, regulatory/political, social, and economic factors.
- 2.12. What is the least wealthy (and most wealthy) community in the City of Los Angeles? What is the least wealthy (and most wealthy) city in the County of Los Angeles? What is the least wealthy (and most wealthy) county in the State of California? How does one even approach addressing these questions? What is likely the best source of information to answer these questions? What other questions, drawn from the pervasive themes from the Walls' book, are just as important or more important than socio-economic status?
- 2.13. Rex is clearly a chronic alcoholic. Summarize the history, purpose, goals, and effectiveness of the Alcoholics Anonymous program. What is the Al-anon program? Design a research grant proposal or an evaluation strategy to study one of these programs. Relative to alcoholism, can other addictions, such as sex, gambling, and other vices, also be pathological addictions? Can Internet use be an addiction, and therefore have unintended, negative consequences?
- 2.14. Jeannette is bullied at school by some girls led by one particular girl. Under what circumstances does this bullying end? Why? Similarly, Jeannette and Brian are bullied on the street by a group of boys led by one particular boy. Under what circumstances does this bullying end? Why? Contrast the two situations. Contrast the bullying the Walls' faced by the boys in Welch and by the Mexican girls in Phoenix.

3. *Science and Mathematics*

- 3.1. A variety of minerals are found in the Southern U.S. desert, and West Virginia is a coal town. What is the distribution of important minerals and fossil deposits across the geography of the U.S.? How does the geology differ in different parts of the U.S.?
- 3.2. Jeannette explains the mixture she uses to "brush her teeth." Describe to your dentist, if you have one, this section of the book, including the approximate years (Jeannette's age at the time) and economic context. Take notes on her or his response, and report back to class.

- 3.3. Jeannette turns in her math homework one day in binary (base 2) instead of “normal” (base 10). What is 93 (base 10) converted into base 2? What is base 2 used for on a daily basis today? Why?
- 3.4. Rex Walls had an idea for a device to help him find gold more efficiently and an idea to burn low-grade coal more efficiently. What is the science (theory and principles) behind each of those ideas?
- 3.5. Recall that in Welch Brian and Jeannette fought “the battle of Little Hobart Street” using a catapult to launch rocks at their neighborhood bullies. What might be a general equation for the trajectory of the rocks? With respect to the origin on a Cartesian graph, is this function concave or convex? What variables do Brian and Jeannette have to estimate well to use the catapult effectively? What parameters are likely out of their control? Bonus: How does one derive the speed and additionally, the acceleration, of the rocks along the trajectory?
- 3.6. In addition to the planet Venus, what two stars do Rex and Jeannette see and discuss? What is the difference (or differences) between a planet and a star? From our perspective on earth, is Venus brighter or dimmer than the other two planets? Explain, using the language of (key principle) of astronomy. What major, recent discovery regarding planets has been made since the time of Jeannette’s childhood?
- 3.7. Under what conditions will kerosene violently explode? Explain your answer using at least one principle of physics and at least one principle of chemistry.

4. *Engineering and Computer Science*

- 4.1. Rex Walls had an idea for a device to help him find gold more efficiently and an idea to burn low-grade coal more efficiently. What is the engineering (practical application) behind each of those ideas? What is a feasibility study?
- 4.2. Rex taught Jeannette Morse code. What is Morse code? Who is the code named after? In what part of Rex’s life do you think he learned it? Does anyone still use Morse code anymore? Why or why not?
- 4.3. In Battle Mountain, the Walls family uses “big spools” found by the side of the railroad tracks as makeshift furniture. What material was likely on the spools? What was it likely used for? Why were the spools likely to be found next to the railroad tracks rather than some other place convenient for crass dumping?
- 4.4. In Welch, Jeannette works in a newsroom that prints her school newspaper. The newsroom has a “police scanner” to learn what is happening in the community. Are such devices used today? Can they monitor other types of communications other than police calls? How do journalists conduct “electronic news gathering (ENG)”? Does ENG differ by print media, radio media, or television media? Does the

Internet change the way news is gathered since Jeannette's work on the school newspaper?

- 4.5. In Welch, Jeannette builds a simple device to try to adjust her "buck teeth." What is the history of mechanical braces for teeth? How are modern braces built? How are braces used in third-world countries? Who is an engineer? What is the relationship between engineering and economics? What is the definition of quality? Bonus: Build a replica of the homemade braces using Jeannette's book description.

5. *Business and Economics*

- 5.1. Jeannette and Brian pick up and return scrap metal occasionally. What is today's "going price" (also called the "spot" price) for scrap metal? Why is the going price for copper higher than for scrap metal? Interestingly, some people are professional copper thieves today. Other than the fact that stealing is illegal, why is this profession a particularly dangerous one? Support your argument with at least one secondary source (e.g., a periodical such as a daily newspaper or a weekly newsmagazine).
- 5.2. Rex indicates that Lily (Jeannette's Grandma on his mom's side) would be "making an investment" by providing him money for the Prospector. How do the terms "investment" and "expense" differ?
- 5.3. Rose Mary indicates that she owns some land in Texas. In fact, she gets a monthly check for leasing the rights to the oil on the property. How do professionals go about deriving the valuation of a piece of land (called a "parcel")? How should the mineral or fossil rights to the land be calculated?
- 5.4. Senior Executives (e.g., CEOs) at large companies hire consultants and take specially-designed workshops in topics such as "transformative leadership." Review the Wikipedia page on the subject of "transformative leadership." Describe individuals, if any, from the book who you believe embody this idea over the course of the book (or at any time in the book). Support your thesis with two or more pieces of evidence from the book.
- 5.5. In Welch, a social worker from the government visits once, but then never returns. How does the social worker know to visit the Walls home? Speculate on why the social worker doesn't return.
- 5.6. According to Jeannette, Rex is always complaining about some type of "conspiracy" in the United Mine Workers, the Electrical Union, and unions in general. What is the relationship of unions (sometimes called "collective bargaining") to the contemporary workplace? Support your thesis with two different articles. One of the articles needs to be from "peer-reviewed" literature.

- 5.7. When the Walls family leaves Phoenix for Welch, Rose Mary decides neither to sell the house nor rent it out. The lower-division core for business students is Accounting (accurate numeric recording of recent transactions), Economics (behavioral decisions under scarce resources), Statistics (did what we see and measure occur by random chance or by something else?), and Law (the regulations and past court decisions related to how individuals treat each other and their respective properties). These lower-division core course requirements haven't changed much in more than forty years. Using the language of one or more of the lower-division core business courses, describe what might happen to the Phoenix house, and by extension, Rose Mary's net worth over time?
- 5.8. As Senior Editor of the Welch school newspaper, Jeannette doubles circulation by including a new section called "Birthday Corner." The upper-division core for business students is Finance (measuring and managing return on investment of capital), Marketing (measuring and managing consumer behavior and brand image), Operations (measuring and managing process efficiency and product quality), and Management (understanding organizational behavior especially with regards to planning, leading, organizing, and controlling). Like the lower-division core course requirements, these upper-division core course requirements haven't changed much in more than forty years. Using the language of one or more of the upper-division core business courses, describe why the newspaper circulation doubled, why is this important, how are costs managed at a newspaper, and what is Jeannette's teacher's plan for replacing Jeannette when Jeannette leaves?
- 5.9. Using the same upper-division core concepts above to support your answer, explain the reasoning behind why Lori speaks German as a server at the German restaurant in New York City? Similarly, why does the City of New York sell the dilapidated apartment to the squatters, including Rex and Rose Mary, for \$1?
- 5.10. If coal as an energy source is so important, then why is Welch a poor town? Similarly, if gold/silver/titanium/pyrite/copper are important, then why is Battle Mountain a poor town? On the other hand, why was Phoenix growing? Bonus: Why was Las Vegas growing?
- 5.11. The driving distance between Welch, WV and Manhattan, NY is about 580 miles (or about one long day's drive). How come the Walls children do relatively well so fast in New York?
- 5.12. Rex has many clever ideas. Draw a distinction between a "clever idea" and an "innovation". Similarly, Rose Mary has many creative talents. How does one transform oneself from an "artist" to a "commercial artist".
- 5.13. At Welch High School, the guidance counselor advises Jeannette to stay for senior year. There are several reasons that the counselor gives, and three of them

are “you’ll miss the prom”, “you’ll miss senior day” and “this is your home.” In general, how do you when you are getting good advice or bad advice?

6. *Arts, Media, and Communication*

- 6.1. In Phoenix, Rex and Rose Mary listen to a song entitled “The Streets of Laredo”. What genre of music is that song? In Welch, Rose Mary gets a ride to her teaching job in Davy with a woman who plays Barbara Mandrell songs in the car. What genre of music are those songs? Compare and contrast those two genres. How do people come to like different, often completely different, kinds of music (and by extension, art)?
- 6.2. The rights for this book have been picked up by Paramount Studios. In your view, what should be the character, plot, setting, style, and theme of the movie? In your view, how would you score (music) the movie? How would you go about scoring a movie for a time period different from your own lifetime?

7. *Education*

- 7.1. Jeannette describes evenings after a meager dinner where the family would all read books from the local library. The family would lie on the floor around a big dictionary, look up words they didn’t know, and debate the various meanings. What, if any, is the equivalent process in today’s (Internet age) terms?
- 7.2. In *Battle Mountain*, Lori helped her mom with her spelling. One of the words that Rose Mary misspelled was *Halloween*. Is there a single spelling of this word? How do you know? What is the history of the word? What would be the best source for this history and spelling of this word? Are all dictionaries the same?
- 7.3. The word “skedaddle” might be called an *idiom*, or perhaps a *cultural idiom*. What is the etymology of the word “skedaddle”? How do words like this originate and spread? What are other idioms? How does one learn an idiom? What is the relationship between “learning in the classroom” and “learning out of the classroom”?
- 7.4. In *Battle Mountain*, Lori helped her mom with her “lesson plans”. Assume you are a classroom instructor. Design a lesson plan for teaching an issue or theme from this book. There is no single, best approach to a lesson plan; however, the lesson plan should involve a clear, stated objective, a narrative for how this objective is aligned with overall course goals, an outline of key topics to be covered, how the time will be apportioned between lecture and interactive exercise/discussion, and some type of student performance evaluation.
- 7.5. From what a reader can tell from the book, Jeannette is relatively close to her father, and Lori is relatively close to her mother. What things does Jeannette learn from her father to become successful? And is Jeannette successful, and if so, why?

What things does Lori learn from her mother to become successful? Again, is Lori successful, and if so, why?

- 7.6. At Barnard College, Professor Fuchs asks Jeannette directly and publicly, “What do you know about the lives of the underprivileged?” and “What do you know about the hardships and obstacles that the underclass faces?” Jeannette ponders this question, and then replies, “You have a point.” What culture—artifacts, values, and assumptions—is the Professor using to construct her questions? What culture—artifacts, values and assumptions—is Jeannette using to respond?

8. *Library*

- 8.1. Lily (Grandma) used to teach occasionally in a town called “Yampi”. This Arizona town is spelled incorrectly in the book. Determine the correct spelling of this town. Describe the process you used to determine the correct spelling.
- 8.2. Is the Owl Club still functioning in Battle Mountain? Describe the process you used to determine your answer to this question.
- 8.3. Recall that the Walls family ate “Jack Mackerel” often, both in Battle Mountain and Welch. The Wikipedia page for “[Pacific] Jack Mackerel” suggests that “In the past mackerel consumption was considered a sign of low income. In the American segregated Southern states, it was often associated with black Americans. Today, most of these stereotypes are gone.” Evaluate the reliability and validity of these three sentences.

9. *Extended Learning*

- 9.1. In Welch, Rose Mary has to go away for two months in the summer to “update her teaching credential.” Why is life-long learning important? Estimate the number of years between when she would have received her teaching credential and when she needed to go away for two months. What types of things do you think a teacher needs to learn to stay current? What about other (non-teaching) professionals in society?

Interdisciplinary Ideas

- Recall that in the “skedaddle” from Battle Mountain to Phoenix, Rex allows Brian’s collection of toy soldiers along for the trip, but only allows Jeannette one rock from her collection of rocks. Later, Rex tells Jeannette that he was wrong—a collection is, in fact, one thing. Using ideas from both philosophy and mathematics, propose a thesis that a collection is (or isn’t) a single thing. Prepare to defend your position with an oral argument.