

Reflections Prompted by the Maintenance of Certification

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Has it really been 10 years since I took the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology (ABPN) Forensic Psychiatry Maintenance of Certification (MOC) examination? That thought is disturbing enough in and of itself. But do I really have to take it again? And do I really have to study? I have served on the ABPN Forensic Committee for the last 11 years, writing test questions for the Certification and MOC examinations, reviewing questions written by other people, helping to assemble tests (not this particular one), and reviewing test and question data. Oh, well, I thought, none of us became forensic psychiatrists by NOT worrying about taking tests. Also, I kept thinking how embarrassing it would be to fail.

So I guess I will have to study, an exercise in refreshing immediate recall of overlearned information, some of which has been memorized and consigned to the storerooms of my brain multiple times. In other words, not fun. And I always have so many things going on, so studying for the MOC keeps falling to the bottom of the priority list. And I get distracted. And I suspect I might be avoiding studying, as I have been thinking about it for weeks, but not actually doing it.

So I retreat to Bywater, our weekend place on the Rappahanock River in the Northern Neck of Virginia, my favorite place. Maybe that will help me focus. It's quiet and isolated—Lancaster County is so far off the beaten track that even the Civil War didn't come here, which is very unusual for Virginia. One of the biggest local highlights is that George Washington was born near here. The river is both peaceful

and interesting; every day it's different than the day before, and the river often changes even over the course of one day.

I woke up early (apparently as you get older, you don't sleep as much, which is kind of a drag) to a dreary, chilly, rainy, can't-see-the-other-side-of-the-river morning. I went downstairs to make coffee, thinking about how to go about studying for the MOC. I looked out the window at the tidal pond and the small river beach, and I saw the juvenile blue heron that I noticed the last couple of mornings. I guess she has started having breakfast here every morning! Blue herons remind me that birds really have evolved from dinosaurs. This beautiful creature's snakelike movements and speed as she nabbed the tiny fish in the pond were enthralling.

As the coffee was brewing, I watched the blue heron. She stuck around for about 20 minutes and then moved on. I poured myself a cup of the coffee, thinking about my husband, who usually makes the coffee. Over the past 30 years, we have divided up certain chores and responsibilities. He makes the coffee, I don't (and there's a reason for that). I took a sip and, for a change, it was drinkable.

I drank my coffee and watched the tidal pond, even after the heron left. The pair of young osprey nesting on the platform near the dock were also helping themselves to breakfast in the pond. I missed the more mature pair that used to nest here. The older pair had babies every year: Frodo and Sam one year, Merry and Pippin another year, Tom [Bombadil] and Goldberry the next year, and so on until last year, when this younger pair appeared and took over this nest. They were still figuring out the having babies thing. I hope they get it this year, because watching

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the baby osprey grow and learn to fly is an incredible experience.

My brother called to check in, which was heartwarming. He is my only sibling, and we had not been close for decades. In recent years we have become much closer, for which I am very grateful.

After the phone call, it was time to start studying. But the clutter in the bedroom had been bothering me, so I packed three big black garbage bags of gently used clothes and blankets to give away. Oh, yes, the MOC. I went to my desk and opened a pack of notecards; I was going to review old-school by making my own notes as I read through the outline and textbook. I realized I could hear myself think because I was, somewhat unusually, alone: no husband, no “adultlet” children, no dog barking at every squirrel, car, and delivery truck; no responsibilities except to myself. My desk faces the tidal pond, the river beach, and the river, and the view through the windows takes my breath away every time I look, regardless of the weather. As I was admiring the view, I noticed that the back porch looked like a disaster area, so I figured I’d just take a few minutes to tidy up. I’m not avoiding, really. It has to be done.

Outside again, still dreary and rainy. But now I had a mission. Scattered around were about fifteen pairs of river/water shoes; I threw away about half of them. Then I sorted out the safety vests, which we use for kayaking. What to do with the two broken “beginner” fishing rods? We got them at Target and tried to figure out how to fish from the dock, but we never got the hang of it. I can’t decide whether to throw these away or not, so I just put them out of the way. Some decisions are hard. Then I tackled the sail my husband bought to use on his kayak. I still can’t understand why someone would want a sail on a kayak. It took some time to fold it up in such a way that it fit in the storage bag. At the very bottom of the pile, I found a number of random items, including some torn mesh screen netting and an old, dirty buoy. Those were easy to throw away. The back porch looked better than it had in a long time.

I went back inside to wash my hands, intending for sure to sit at the desk and start studying. Then I noticed the unopened box with the hand-held metal detector I had ordered. Really, I needed to assemble it and make sure it worked properly before it was too late to return it if it didn’t work. Why a metal detector? Last year I found a cannonball in one of the neglected flower beds. I have to admit, all the

flower beds are neglected. But the first time I did some weeding in this particular bed, I found the cannonball.

Our location is such that the cannonball could be from the 1600s, because we are situated along the much-traveled waterways not far from the original English settlements. It could also be from the 1700s, because there was fighting here during the Revolutionary War, or the 1800s, of course, during the War of 1812. There is apparently no way to tell how old the cannonball is. When I was making plans to come here for this study weekend, I thought it would be interesting to see if I could find any other weapons of mass destruction in the flower beds, so I bought the metal detector.

I could use the metal detector on the beach, too, because all kinds of things turn up on our river beach. Most are broken bits of ceramic or glass, but you never know. For example, a couple of years ago, I was sitting on the dock watching a pod of dolphins playing in the river. I started rapping on the dock to see if they would react and unbelievably, a group of them came over, I guess to check out the sound. As I rapped, some would pop their heads up and look. We played for a few minutes, me rapping on the wood, different dolphins popping up and down looking around and looking at me. Unbelievable. Then, I accidentally knocked my glasses off and they fell into the river. I kicked off my sandals and jumped in, scattering the dolphins in the blink of an eye. I searched the shallow river bottom just beneath dock but I didn’t find them. My husband looked, too (they were expensive progressive lenses), but he had no luck either. But maybe they would turn up now, two years later, if I used the metal detector. Unless the dolphins took them, which they might have. Who knows?

So I assembled the metal detector, and I held my breath. Surprisingly, the power actually came on. I had read and followed the assembly instructions, which is not my usual *modus operandi*. I can’t remember the last time I followed a set of instructions to assemble a mechanical device; again, that’s usually my husband’s thing. When I glanced through the instructions on how to use the metal detector, I was disappointed to note that this one can’t be used in water. I guess the glasses are gone for good.

Despite the fact that I was now properly equipped at least to find more cannonballs, the weather was still cold and wet, definitely not a day to go outside to

hunt for WMDs. And I had to study for the MOC. Well, the weather was supposed to be better the next day, so I promised myself I would go out metal detecting then.

Now that I couldn't think of anything else to do, I sat down to study. I made it through the entire test outline, intermittently muttering to myself out loud. Really, do I need to take this exam? Can't they just give me a pass for services rendered to the ABPN Forensic Committee? At some point, however, I realized it's probably the last multiple choice exam I will ever take. I'll be damned if I take this test again when I am 70! What a liberating thought. Like all of us, I have had a lifetime of multiple choice exams, from as far back as I can remember. I used to love taking tests (with the exception of organic chemistry and calculus). As much as I once enjoyed them, I don't think I will miss them.

By midafternoon, an unexpected gift: the sky turned blue, the sun came out, and I could see the other side of the river. And I had made it through the outline, with a very satisfying pile of notecards to show for my efforts. As I finished, I told myself I should go through my notes one more time, but some hours of daylight were still left. I felt compelled to walk down to the beach to engage in a bit of mudlarking, one of my favorite pastimes, as a reward for finally doing some studying for the MOC! Most of the stuff I find in the muddy riverbank when the tide is out is garbage that needs to be pulled off the beach or out of the water and thrown away, but the river does yield fascinating bits of history.

I have quite a collection of treasures I have collected over the years; nevertheless finding something special only happens once in a while. I have found a few Native American arrowheads, interesting bits of 19th-century pottery, old glass medicine bottles, and newer bottles, including clear glass Bayer aspirin bottles, cobalt-blue Milk of Magnesia bottles, and even most of an old red glass car tail light. A few weeks ago, I found an oddly shaped glass bottle with a spout on one side on the top. I had never seen anything like it and had no idea what it could be, but a manufacturer's name was embossed on the glass. I was able to use the name to identify it on the Internet. To my surprise, I had found a 19th-century glass inkwell in

perfect condition. In fact, an identical inkwell from the same manufacturer was for sale on eBay for \$35! A major find!

So I often walk on the beach and in the shallows, keeping my eyes peeled for treasures. Today, I found an intact green-tinted glass medicine bottle embossed with the words "Chas H. Fletcher" on one side and "Castoria" on the other. I was again able to use the Internet to find the back story. And again, success! Turns out Fletcher's Castoria was originally a Victorian-era "snake oil" laxative, which continued to be made and sold into the middle of the 20th century. And another valuable find: the exact same bottle sells for \$10 to \$15 on eBay! The bottle I found was probably not too old; it looked like it was machine-made, not hand-blown. You can tell by looking for the seams. But finding a perfect old glass medicine bottle with a back story? SO COOL!

When I got back to the house, I carefully washed the bottle and placed it on the kitchen window sill with my other river treasures. I called home to tell my family about my find and to see how they were doing. Alone but not lonely. My husband told me he loves me. My son and daughter had stopped fighting. My daughter had made chocolate-covered graham crackers with sprinkles! My daughter. Really! She takes after me when it comes to kitchen activities. By the way, there were none left when I got home

And the day is not yet over. Tonight I will make it to the end of a great book, which I have been looking forward to finishing for the past week. But before I go back inside, I'll spend a little more time as the sun sets over the river, looking at the silhouette of the two young osprey settling down in their nest for the night. So, as I sit on the very tidy back porch watching the light fade and the sky change from blue to red and orange, I am reflecting on all the gifts I have enjoyed today, all made possible because I needed to retreat somewhere to review for the MOC. Maybe I should take it again in 10 years (if it's still being offered!) . . . who knows what gifts it might bring me then?

Post script: Dr. Gold is pleased to report that she passed the MOC. Unfortunately, her glasses have still not turned up.