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The Sunlight of a Suggestion

Given my ambivalence about being a schoolteacher, it seems fitting that my most memorable experience in the profession occurred as I stared into an empty classroom. I was at the Hopkins School in New Haven, Connecticut. The English Department chairman had arranged for me, a teacher at another private school, to observe classes. Greeting me at the front desk, he ushered me into his office for some shop talk before first period. I dread these visits, which private school teachers undertake to keep abreast of their peers. When it comes to professional development, I prefer almost any alternative—taking courses, attending conferences—to tracking down a unfamiliar campus, making small, or worse, professional talk with other teachers, and sitting squeezed into a student desk through a succession of English classes.

My dislike of these visits has a more serious basis as well: I worry that I am negligent in areas of English instruction that matter a great deal to my peers. For example, I have always hated the study of grammar, and no sooner learn parts of speech and sentence components than I forget them. Whenever I am compelled to teach grammar, usually because a parent insists on it, I furiously study the handbook before class. Even then I respond to some of my students' technical questions with "I should know that" or "I'll look that up and get back to you." Often I'll extinguish their motivation in

advance by telling them that memorizing grammatical rules and terms won't help their writing nearly as much as my diligent editing of their papers.

I'm even less successful at teaching vocabulary, though it was my own forte as a middle school student. Each September I mark "SAVE" on the blackboard next to challenging words from the book we're reading, and vow to keep updating the list until June. As the term progresses, however, my students' expressions harden and they take out their notebooks with increasing slowness whenever I announce a vocabulary drill. This so disheartens me that I quickly substitute a creative writing exercise or hand out a promising new poem. By December our vocabulary list remains stalled on October's reading assignments and I quietly erase it; a few weeks later I complete the retreat by abandoning my Friday vow to "get back to learning some words next week."

With these setbacks in mind I approach my visit to another teacher's English class worried that he or she might accuse me, as I have accused myself, of not being a real teacher at all, but a dilettante whose main talent is for entertaining students and who leaves them unprepared for future demands of critical reading and writing. Worse, when these visits deliver me into the company of a teacher eager to compare educational philosophies, I have little to say. I can name books that students have liked and exercises that have succeeded, but lack any substantial knowledge of, much less interest in, contemporary pedagogy.

No sooner had my Hopkins host begun to pepper me with questions than I prayed that someone would drop by to distract him. Glancing into the hall, I spied an open classroom. The brightly lit interior contained the familiar steel and plastic modular desks, a blackboard, and shelves lined

with copies of novels and poetry anthologies. There was nothing remarkable about the room. I occupied an almost identical one at the Foote School, where I have taught ninth-grade English for eleven years. Hopkins was similar to Foote; its students came from the same affluent New Haven families, which included lawyers, doctors, architects, and Yale professors. Roughly a third of Foote's graduates moved on to Hopkins after eighth or ninth grade, so it wouldn't have surprised me if the bell had rung and several of my former students had filed into the hall.

What did surprise me was that the room suddenly embodied everything that I loved about schoolteaching, and convinced me that despite my insecurities I was deeply invested in it. This revelation was not accompanied by any dramatic visions. Rather, as my host repeated his query about which Shakespeare plays I assigned in ninth grade, I thought how inviting that classroom looked. The teacher's weighty wooden desk, perfect for perching or even standing on, reminded me that not only did I belong there, but I longed to be there, greeting twenty teenagers as they sauntered in chatting about the previous night's reading. I thought of a story Adrienne Rich tells in her essay on Emily Dickinson. When Dickinson's niece Martha visited the poet in her Amherst bedroom, "Dickinson made as if to lock the door with an imaginary key, turned, and said 'Matty: here's freedom.'"

I spent the rest of my day at Hopkins observing classes and meeting with teachers. While I came away from my host's Shakespeare class impressed by the sophistication of his tenth graders' discussion of *Antony and Cleopatra*, I also felt the familiar mix of boredom and inadequacy that made me dread these visits in the first place. In my own classes I not only steered clear of Shakespeare, but also rarely managed to keep my students in

their seats for a full period. My patience with adolescent rambunctiousness and love of outdoor projects like “haiku hunts” and reenactments of scenes from adventure stories made some of my teaching look frivolous.

I wasn't proud that my mind wandered during those well-run Hopkins classes, or that my own were so much less scholarly. But the pleasure that I felt upon looking into the empty classroom at least made me feel confident about my passion and affection for my job. It also made me rethink one of my most enduring assumptions—that this job in a middle school would eventually give way to a full-time career teaching writing to college and graduate students. In anticipation of this, I had already spent several years teaching an introductory writing course at Yale. In moments of embarrassment about my middle school work I wasn't above thinking of Yale as my real job, and others colluded in this fantasy. Hearing what I did for a living, most people responded more approvingly to the name "Yale" than to "Foote." They didn't sneer at Foote, but seemed to see my job there as more interesting than impressive, and definitely temporary.

I had never told them how I dreaded each Yale class period and longed for each semester to end. Make no mistake, I loved the undergraduates and felt happy when they complimented my teaching, wrote thank-you notes after the term ended or stopped me on campus to say that they missed the class. I even found the class periods stimulating and enjoyable once they started. But my concern that I would make a fool of myself made me extremely nervous. I coped by overpreparing, planning two classes' worth of material for each one out of a fear that the discussion would stall with a half hour to go. I also overworked on student papers,

spending up to an hour on each and returning it with copious annotations and a multi-page comment that was like an essay in itself.

I felt like an impostor at Yale, just as I did at Foote. Compared to the credentials of my Yale colleagues, my modest writing success, middle school teaching job, and dubious graduate degree from a continuing education program embarrassed me. Convinced that I lacked both the erudition and the charisma that Yale students seemed to prize in their popular professors, I focused on those areas of teaching that I could affect through labor. My strategy worked—in their end-of-term evaluations students praised my preparedness and meticulous critiques. For a few days after reading these questionnaires I felt relieved and told myself that my anxiety had been unnecessary. Unfortunately, a few classes into the next term my nervousness would return and I would push myself harder than ever.

I felt at odds with Yale in other respects, too. The large course that I taught had numerous sections, and the teachers of those sections met several times a term. My colleagues were mostly former Yale graduate students who had recently received their PhDs and were now taking a year to apply for tenure-track jobs. A few were local writers like myself, adjuncts who taught at more than one school with no hope of permanent employment. In the meetings we talked generally about teaching and students—more often about "the student" than our individual students—and closed with someone critiquing an essay from his or her syllabus. These critiques were highly academic, as one would expect from a Yale discussion.

I felt proud to be in such high-powered intellectual company and to understand, if not enjoy, the language of scholarship, but I never thought

these meetings had much to do with teaching writing. In my view, the effectiveness of a writing class depends on the teacher's being bright, inspiring, and a good editor. As for editing, one has to recognize the student writer's intention and then help guide the piece without doing too much of the work oneself. Like writing, teaching demands equal parts talent, experience, and hard work. This leaves little to talk about in a meeting.

Our early meetings often began with one of the new adjuncts marveling at the competence of the Yale undergraduates. I certainly admired my students' abilities—their insights and their writings were superior to those of any other college students I had taught. But what truly impressed me was their poise. In my college days I had not been remotely as well-adjusted as these kids, most of whom possessed a strong desire to learn as well as the energy and focus to fulfill their potentials. Yet even these qualities made me uncomfortable. I liked my Yale students and rarely found reason to begrudge them their gifts or opportunities (which had been my opportunities as well). But I sensed that their lives would follow the same charmed route whether they were taught by me or someone else, that I was a routine stop rather than the lifeline that most teachers would like to be.

My dissatisfaction with Yale increased to the point where I accepted an offer to adapt my course for a new online education program, a move that meant relinquishing my on-campus class. The decision made me nervous as well as relieved. My identity as a Yale professor had always boosted my self-esteem, even if my actual status was more that of cheap part-time labor. This change coincided with an equally significant revision in my job description at Foote. For the first time, the size of the ninth grade dipped below fifteen students, leaving only enough for one section rather than the

two I usually taught. The principal proposed that I fill the gap in my schedule by serving as a kind of poet-in-residence for the lower grades, engaging younger students in poetry writing activities that would supplement their regular curriculums.

I spent the summer wondering if my career had just taken two steps backwards. Not only had I given up the prestigious Yale job, but at Foote I would no longer only be working with teenagers who could read grown-up books and poems and conduct grown-up discussions about them. The sixth graders I would visit in September, born the year I had arrived at Foote, were children, the youngest I had ever taught. I had no clue what kinds of poems these eleven-year-olds might like or even how to talk to them. My love for contemporary music, movies, and TV usually served me well with ninth graders, but would a sixth grader recognize a reference to Seinfeld or The White Stripes? Would all contemporary poetry be over their heads, limiting me to Shel Silverstein or Dr. Seuss?

As it turned out, my sixth graders did love comic poems, in particular one about Spiderman narrated in the voice of Elmer Fudd. One girl laughed so hard during my reading of it that I worried that she had stopped breathing. For the rest of the year she and her classmates would pass me in the halls and ask "Is your cape fwame wesistant?" as they scurried by. But they were also receptive to Ezra Pound and Charles Simic, especially when I invited several up to the front to act out the poems as I read them. One boy looked convincingly bored during John Berryman's Dream Song #14 that begins "Life, friends, is boring," and five girls collapsed giggling to the floor when Buffalo Bill shot "onetwothreefourfive pigeonsjustlikethat" in e.e.

cummings' famous poem. They began to look forward to these dramatizations and other rituals that evolved throughout the term.

One of their favorite traditions arose from my last-minute decision to bring in candles on my first day. I told the students that many poets claimed to enter a trance state when writing, so we would make this transformation an official part of my visits. In the darkened room I lit the candles and asked the students to close their eyes, reminding them that the surest way to know if someone was in a trance was if he or she said "I'm not in a trance." (I loved watching the faces of the more skeptical boys when I announced this). I told them that after emerging from the trance they would think they had been in the classroom when actually they had been off engaging in wild escapades in foreign countries. The "trance induction ceremony" gave me an opportunity to read poems aloud to them while they rested their heads on their desks.

When I began working with the sixth graders I already had a decade's experience teaching adolescents and knew how charming and unpredictable they could be. I liked ninth graders in particular for their combination of intellectual maturity and child-like love of fun, which seem to exist in perfect balance in fourteen-year-olds. I sensed that some sixth graders could have handled a serious literary discussion, but most of them craved entertainment with all the insistence of a giant demanding his supper, and they didn't care if the fun came from a hired magician or an Ezra Pound poem. They reminded me of Henry Adams's description of his students when he began his teaching career: "their minds burst open like flowers at the sunlight of a suggestion. They were quick to respond; plastic to a mould; and incapable of fatigue."

In short, I was happy teaching the sixth graders, and relieved to have left Yale. I missed the college students, both their friendliness and their intelligence, but not my stage fright, nor the commutes to and from classes, office hours, and essay pick-ups that are the lot of every part-time college instructor. I missed the prestige of teaching at Yale, but not the tendency of many people connected with the institution—teachers, students, parents of students, spouses of teachers—to think more highly of themselves because of their affiliation. I had always deplored this tendency in myself, but it took my exposure to the sixth graders and feeling of liberation from Yale to convince me that in my case prestige and contentment would never overlap.

An epiphany one day confirmed this for me. For our first writing exercise I had asked the sixth graders to compose a poem that repeated their favorite color as often as possible. Christie, the girl who had laughed so hard at the Spiderman poem, begged to read first. As she strode to the makeshift podium—a stepstool that I had found in a closet outside my classroom—her uniformly pink wardrobe announced which color her poem would celebrate. Listening to Christie recite "Ode to Pink" with her affection for this color evident on her face, I realized that middle school classrooms were where I belonged. What better place to share my belief in the power of the imagination? Occasionally a Yale science or government major had departed my course wanting to switch to creative writing, but that urge had often been percolating since high school. I had never witnessed anything like Christie's transformation. Those first days with the sixth graders made me feel like an archeologist who tugs on a half-buried piece of pottery and unearths an entire subterranean city—he cannot move on until every last shard has been excavated.

Each week when I arrived for the first of my three sixth-grade classes, the student sitting nearest the door held it open for me while another took the podium from under my arm and placed it at the front of the room. The others pulled out their journals and began revising or re-reading their writing exercises from the previous week. As I unpacked my candles, they clamored for the trance ceremony to begin. I always marveled at how comfortable I felt facing three consecutive groups of twenty eleven-year-olds; even when the students were acting unruly, I found them more invigorating than annoying. I could be myself in these classrooms.

Not so at Yale. I showed flashes of humor, but my obsessive preparation and sense that frivolity would be seen as wasteful kept me from deviating from my lesson plan. In my first semester at Yale an essay on underage drinking had prompted the students to share anecdotes about alcohol abuse. The talk was so passionate that I occasionally allowed similar digressions later in the semester. Then in an end-of-term evaluation a student criticized these as an unproductive use of class time. I disagreed—his classmates clearly hungered to discuss these issues and I knew that the debates would stimulate their writing—but understood his objection. He believed that my job was to train him in a craft, and that this training had lapsed during those impromptu bull sessions.

There was more to the difference between Foote and Yale than my comfort in the classroom. At Foote, I learned early on that choosing texts based solely on literary quality would encumber rather than enhance my teaching of ninth graders. It did me no good to press them to analyze "For the Union Dead" or "Lady Lazarus." Poetry makes many people feel stupid, and middle schoolers who are pushed to understand, much less praise a

challenging poem are no exception. In my first year I would prod the students to analyze poems, then feel annoyed when they looked back at me blankly. Finally a boy placed his fingertips to his temples as if his head hurt and exclaimed "Mr. Milburn, we're just not as smart as you are."

I began to adjust my standards, choosing accessible, often colloquial poems on subjects that adolescents could identify with. One might accuse me of pandering to my students, but as soon as I began to appeal to their tastes, they began liking poetry. This approach also freed me to bring in writing on provocative topics without worrying whether it qualified as "poetry" according to the Norton Anthology, the Pulitzer committee, my colleagues in other grades, or even my own standards. I didn't avoid great poetry, but I also didn't hesitate to exploit their enthusiasm for the less than great. Eventually they would learn to tell the difference.

At Yale, where my primary job was to teach students to discriminate between good and bad writing, the constant focus on literary quality drained the classes of spontaneity. The students only truly relaxed during those freewheeling discussions that I felt obligated to limit. My more advanced students expected and received straight writing workshops, but for younger ones I tried to enliven the class. Once I offered my students an unorthodox assignment. Timing the project to their reading of one of Hunter S. Thompson's essays, I passed out paper and markers and asked them to construct a website that reflected the author's flamboyant personality. The task consumed them from the moment they started. As they drew and wrote intently, sketching images for home pages and giggling at links to Thompson-esque cocaine suppliers and rehab centers, I walked among them observing and asking questions. I was also composing in my mind a defense

of the class's educational value—both for my own reassurance and in case a student reproached me in an end-of-term evaluation.

What the students were accomplishing, I realized, was similar to what my sixth graders did when they played pigeons in e.e. cummings's Buffalo Bill poem. They were having a great time filling their websites with graphics and making up "Frequently Asked Questions" and celebrity blurbs, but they were also refining their views of Thompson's writing. The class ended with each webmaster taping his or her site to the blackboard and explaining it. The exercise relaxed the students and emboldened me to depart from convention again during our unit on cultural critique. In conjunction with Joan Didion's essay on Martha Stewart, students brought in their favorite comfort foods. As preparation for their essay critiquing some aspect of contemporary culture, they passed around and "critiqued" the nostalgic and emotional overtones of pints of Haagen-Dazs, packets of Oreos, and homemade fudge.

Eventually I supplemented these classes with scavenger hunts around New Haven leading up to an essay on place, and visits to classmates' dorm rooms and portraits in the Yale Center for British Art to introduce a unit on profiling people. The informality of these classes let me step out of my professorial straitjacket and be myself, and the students cited them as the term's highlights. But I hesitated to mention them at faculty meetings, lest I steer the discussion from how to teach interviewing technique to how many colored markers to buy. I anticipated my colleagues' disapproval, and imagined them saying that for \$40,000 a year students deserved better.

The literary critic Helen Vendler wrote about poets, "When talent for content grows equal to talent for contour, the union of Truth and Beauty that

is all we ask of poems can take place." These two talents can be as challenging for teachers to balance as for poets. The content of my courses always inspires me less than the creative opportunities offered by each class period, a fact that makes me better suited to teaching in middle schools than in colleges, which prize mastery of one's subject over classroom improvisations. But I wonder whether a balance of talents is desirable in any field. A teacher's idiosyncrasies can prove as instructive as his or her orthodoxies. In a classroom, as in a poem, it's the irregularities that keep things fresh, original, and human. Here's freedom.