



A Life in School

WHAT THE TEACHER LEARNED

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THE DAY
I WALKED OUT
OF CLASS



Over a period of six years, I taught seven courses under the no-frills method and eight in which I pushed further into the unknown. While I was teaching the more experimental courses my life was a roller coaster. I'd go to bed at night, obsessed with thoughts of what had happened in class that day. The teaching was not an orderly progression through a body of material. It was not about the mastery of knowledge or the acquisition of a skill. It was about letting chaos in, about not knowing, not being in control.

Early on I'd stumbled on the realization that my students had very little idea who they were. My idea was to give them the opportunity to find out. I wouldn't tell them what to think or what to do. I would let them flounder and make them take the responsibility for learning on themselves. Since they had no experience of this, naturally, once the door to self-determination was open, chaos entered. How long it stayed depended on the class—sometimes a few weeks, sometimes as many as six or seven. Then the course would settle down. A plan would be produced, assignments given, routines established.

Each course I taught this way was different and had its own history of surprises and disappointments, moments of revelation, frustration, and

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joy. When I ask myself what the value was of teaching in this way, what the students learned, what I learned, my throat closes and I fall silent. It's not so much that the questions don't have answers as that the answers can't be given in a straightforward way. Occasionally, when a student in one of these classes would report that his or her roommate had asked what the course was like, the student's reply invariably would be, "You had to be there." And it's true, you did. The most I can say by way of summation is that for me the courses were of such an intensity that I am still trying to understand them, as if they were written in burning cipher, and I have not yet discovered the code.

One incident that remains branded in my consciousness occurred about a third of the way through a course called Reading for Yourself, my most experimental course thus far. I had come to class that day loaded for bear. We had been discussing some very short texts—some poems, a couple of short stories—assigned by one of the students, and the poems (by Emily Dickinson) had come from a movie we'd seen together, which they'd also chosen. But not all the students seemed to have read the material; not all were participating by a long shot. I'd bent over backward to give them the chance to do what *they* wanted to do, and their response had been constrained, awkward, even in some cases listless. I'd been feeling frustrated for some time, but by that point I was mad. I came to class that day prepared to walk out if *something* didn't happen.

I made a speech. I talked about how I'd tried to let them take the lead, and how disappointed I was that people weren't more engaged. I said that when I came to class I was one hundred percent *there*, and that I expected them to be too. I said I felt frustrated and badly treated by them. I said I was fed up. Well, there was an awful silence. And then one student, her name was Shannon, spoke up. She'd been one of the silent ones, a tall blonde half-drowsy outdoorsy girl who looked sometimes as if she were thinking thoughts of her own that she definitely did not wish to share.

Shannon said: "I hate to read."

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I was stunned. There followed a shouting match between the two of us in which I asked her what in hell she was doing at Duke University, to which she replied that it was that or work at McDonald's. These words and the ensuing exchange made such a deep impression on me that my thinking about undergraduate education since has been largely based on it. But at the moment, I was still mad at the students for not putting more of themselves into the course, and at a certain point I gathered up my things, said it was up to them to come up with a plan for the rest of the semester, and left.

I got in my car and drove to Main Street and paused: it was a beautiful day, and I had my dog, Ribbon, in the car, and my lunch. I'd heard about this entrance to the paths along the Eno River that I'd never been to before, so . . . I decided, what the hell, and off I went. I could have gone back to my office and worked on the tenure letter I'd been laboring over for the last couple of days, or answered some of the endless mail, but it seemed pusillanimous. If I was asking for courage and spontaneity from the students, the least I could do was ask the same of myself.

To get to the Eno you go out Hillsborough Road, cross Route 85, and before you know it, Cole Mill Road comes up on your right. You take Cole Mill for quite a ways—through Croasdaile where some of the wealthy people of Durham live. You keep on going and going until you pass an ammo and guns store on the right, and not too long after that, a road called Rivermont. Then the road dips down, there's a sign for the river, and the next left is the turn-in for the Eno River State Park.

If you take the path to the river, at first you can hardly see it. You only get glimpses through the trees, as if the river were hiding, veiling itself. The trees had very small leaves and looked delicate and graceful; they were lightly touched with yellow and trailing their branches, for it was the fall of the year. The river was grassy at first, and flowing swiftly, brownish, with lots of bubbles. It looked alive. I walked until I came to a rocky beach where the sun was, and I sat down and thought about the class. I'd been making speeches to myself the whole way out, coming up

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with wonderful pithy sentences I could have said if I'd thought of them at the time. I sat on the stones, arms around my legs, while Ribbon enjoyed herself in the water, nose down, smelling things, ears perking up at sounds she could hear and I couldn't, and I speechified some more in my head until finally I started thinking about Shannon.

"Shannon," I said, "the only person who gets a Pass," I said, dramatically, "because she spoke the truth," I said, eyes big, glowering at them all, mentally. But then I thought, what could Shannon have done other than go to Duke? Really and concretely. Well, let's see, I mused. How do I see Shannon? Probably out of doors. I see her on a sailboat, a large sailboat, on the ocean. She's the owner of the boat, and she takes people on vacations in the Pacific or the South Seas. The scene shifts. Now Shannon is tramping through the woods collecting samples, rocks or ferns. She's some kind of environmentalist, and this is part of her work. (I admit she'd have to have gone to some sort of college for that.) She has on muddy boots and a neat hat. Another change. This time Shannon is indoors, her tall figure gracefully inclined so that a little girl with long curly black hair can explain the picture she's been making with finger paints. Shannon is an art teacher in the schools of East Los Angeles. She's wearing jeans, and she's very happy. But, perhaps happier still, there she is in the same jeans, only this time standing with a pitchfork in her hand and wearing a straw hat; the hillside she's on is in Northern California, and she's on her farm, the one she finally bought. She's having trouble with something mechanical, but her troubles are only the froth on a deep sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. One final picture. I couldn't resist it: Shannon on safari in Africa. This time the hat is a topi, and she has a lot of camera gear slung over her shoulders. She is wearing a tan outfit and looking beautiful.

"Far-fetched? Maybe, but all possible. And you"—I'm still speaking to the students in my head—"you wouldn't have to go to a four-year high-pressure traditional university for any of them. You could take sailing lessons, get a job in a marina, crew for a friend. You could go to art

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school. You could apprentice yourself to a farmer. I had a friend who dropped out of an M.A. program in history, apprenticed himself to a farmer in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and then borrowed the money to buy himself a dairy farm. He made a go of it and became quite well-to-do breeding cattle, but his family fell apart—another story. Anyway, you get the point. The choices are not just a B.A. from Duke or working at McDonald's. I'm not trying to get you to drop out of school, either. It's just that we get afraid that if we don't take the road well travelled, we'll go nowhere."

(Still talking to them, still preaching, I can't help myself.) "And at the risk of sounding incredibly corny, as Holden Caulfield would say"—we'd just read *Catcher in the Rye*—"let me confess that as I was driving out here to the Eno a famous line from *Hamlet* popped into my head, a line I'd been taught to regard as a pious platitude. It's Polonius's advice to his son. Holden mentions it disparagingly in *Catcher*.

This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

That was what I was doing when I said I felt you were holding out on me; I was trying to be true to myself. And that is what I want you to do."

I sent this inner speech to my students in the form of a paper entitled "Shannon's Choice." I had walked out of class on a Thursday. The following weekend was parents' weekend at Duke. I imagined some irate parent calling the dean on Monday morning and demanding his money back because his son or daughter was in a class where the instructor had not only demanded that the students organize their own course, but had actually walked out on them. I imagined a lawsuit being brought against me by parents, the university. I imagined being called on the carpet by the powers that be.

None of this came to pass. When I got to my office Monday afternoon, there was a huge pile of Xeroxes outside my door, and taped to

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the wall was a long complicated list of assignments and responsibilities the students promised to carry out. I was overjoyed and limp with relief. I made a card out of four pieces of colored paper with “Hurray!” written all over it again and again. It’s still taped to the wall beside my desk, a reminder to me that some experiments, anyway, do turn out.

Or do they?

The one thing I’ve learned from doing experimental teaching is that you never know, really, what you’ve accomplished. You never know what the students have learned, or if they’ve learned anything, anything solid. One student in this class bought a guitar at the end of the semester and learned to play it. That was the kind of outcome the course had. Another student signed up for a semester at sea (it was Shannon). At a party at my house at the end of the semester I asked the students why they thought it was that we had never succeeded in talking about literature (we had done all sorts of things in that class but rarely had a good literary discussion). They said it was because they didn’t know how.

I felt terrible. I had failed to teach them how to talk about literature! But then I stopped myself. They also told me—several students did—that their ancient love of reading had been rekindled, and others said they had begun to enjoy reading for the first time. Because, they said, the atmosphere was relaxed and nonpressuring. Some students had started reading things on their own who had never done that before. That was learning, but not the kind I was used to aiming for, so I hardly recognized it. It was a change in behavior.

As a group we had reached the point where we could have begun to devote ourselves to a serious intellectual pursuit, because by that time we trusted each other to a significant degree. We had done the work of learning how to be together as a class, had satisfied our curiosity, and had established ourselves as accepted, as contributing, members of the group. The discussion we had at my house that night at the end of the

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semester was one of our few sustained serious conversations. It was excellent. People spoke from a fairly deep level within themselves. They didn't need to impress anyone, me or the other students, because all that had been gotten through, and, besides, it was all over now. Tonally, the conversation was perfect.

If I had been able to have those students for another semester, what would I have done? They were at the point where they were *asking* me to teach them about literature. But what would I have wanted to teach them? I truly do not know. And if I did know, how would I go about doing it in a way that would not bring about a regression from the level of trust and honesty we had reached with one another? Another question I had about this course was, could the floundering, the fear, the chaos and shilly-shallying that characterized the beginning have been avoided? Yes, of course it could. The question is not could it have been avoided, but *should* it have been avoided? This is a real question for me and one I cannot answer.

As for myself, what I learned in this course didn't surface until later. It wasn't until I was getting ready to design a new course in American literature that I knew what I had learned in Reading for Yourself. It came to me in an image: an image of one of the students, his name was Ben, standing on the table in our classroom, holding a sword of light over his head.

How did this happen? One day I gave the students an assignment I'd invented on the spur of the moment in one of my earliest experimental classes: to go to Toys "R" Us. We drove over in three or four cars, spent forty-five minutes in the store—the rules were no talking to anyone, and you could only buy one thing—and we came back to the classroom and wrote for the remainder of the period. For next time, everyone finished the writing assignment, to write eight pages on what the Toys "R" Us experience had brought up.

Ben had bought one of those swords that lights up when you move it, an imitation of the laser swords of the Jedi knights in the *Star Wars*

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trilogy. When we came back to the class, people were clowning around, and Ben climbed up on the table and said, “Oh, Captain, my Captain.” His getting up on the table and reciting poetry was his reference to another assignment we’d done, which was to see *Dead Poets Society* and discuss it together the next day. In the course of that discussion—the best we ever had in that class—it became clear that we were talking about ourselves. I was Robin Williams, the rebel teacher, whom the students called “Captain,” and who they stood up for—literally, they stood on their desks—when he was fired from the school. Part of the class was against Robin Williams’s philosophy of self-expression and self-determination, and part of the class was for it. That day, one of the students brought to class the same poetry anthology that had been used in the movie, the one from which the students read to each other in the cave where their society met. My students wanted to read poetry aloud, too. They found the poems from the movie—I remember their reading lines like “My name is Ozymandias, king of kings,” “Oh, Captain, my Captain, our fearful trip is done”—grabbing the book out of one another’s hands, they were so eager to have a turn. (In all my years of teaching, I’d never seen anything like this.) As they read—and they read poorly, having never been taught how to read poetry aloud—a chill went down my spine, and I felt gooseflesh all over my body. It was the chill you get sometimes from reading poetry. On another day, we read aloud a poem from another movie we’d seen—*Sophie’s Choice*—a poem about death by Emily Dickinson that is recited twice in the movie. As the semester unfolded, that poem kept going through my head. One day I decided to see whether the students knew it too, so I put it on the board with some words missing. It turned out that many of them did know it. We recited it together, as a class. I felt the chill again.

When I created my new American literature course, I did so with the sole intention of letting the students feel the thrilling power of words. In *Reading for Yourself*, the teaching function had been reversed, at least as far as learning about literature was concerned. My students had rein-

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roduced me to the magic of poetry, and I felt for the first time in a long, long time the enchantment that had originally led me to the study of literature, an enchantment that is summed up for me in the image of Ben standing on the table with his sword of light. Somehow, something precious had been rekindled; I didn't want to let the flame die out.

Because I was doing this experimenting alone, without colleagues who'd taken similar risks, and had no way to compare my experience to the experiences of others, I needed some way to come to terms with what I was doing. I needed some way to make sense of experiences that were overpowering in their intensity. So when an invitation came to talk to some undergraduates at Eckerd College, in St. Petersburg, Florida, who were preparing to go into college teaching, I took the opportunity to put the course into narrative form, hoping by this means to lay its ghost.

But narrative did not suit. Thrilling episodes came out sounding banal; the roller-coaster adventure became a pedestrian recital of events. This kind of teaching seemed to require a new kind of writing, a form that would reflect the spasmodic, concentrated quality of the experience, its precariousness, the constant sense of teetering on the brink that accompanied me from day one of that course and during most of my experimental courses, only letting go of me now and then.