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A Reaffirmation of Faith

Some things are like riding a bicycle; once you acquire the talent you rarely need to practice it. Other things, like teaching, are more difficult skills to master. They require a considerable amount of practice and fine-tuning and can always use some improvement and updating. It is for this reason that, after student teaching at East Aurora High School in the fall, I decided to teach in an English 104 class and tutor in the Communication Skills Writing Lab spring semester. For while student teaching was an invaluable learning opportunity, ten short weeks just didn't give me as much classroom exposure as I would have liked. My cooperating teacher at East Aurora was also less than enthusiastic about his profession and students, and I wanted -- I needed -- to observe and work with educators who believed in what they were doing.

Choosing to teach for my Senior Honors Independent Study Project was a choice I kicked myself for more than once, however. I often mused that I should have done something easier than teach. Teaching, after all, is a damned responsible business. Whereas a student is only responsible for himself, the progress of an entire class rests on the shoulders of the teacher. Nevertheless, because I wanted to take every opportunity to develop my craft, my decision was one I felt compelled to make. Making this decision also unfortunately opened up a Pandora's Box of doubts. The old student teaching fears returned the moment I picked up a copy of the 104 textbook,

and they didn't leave until I finished tutoring in the Writing Lab. Questions such as "Will I really teach my students something today?" "Am I explaining this clearly?" and "Do I know enough?" haunted me, the last doubt being the deadliest of them all. At times it undermined my confidence so I wondered if I knew anything at all about English.

Whenever I am faced with these teaching fears it is inevitable that a nagging voice in my head begins whining, "Mary, be a file clerk. You don't have to do something that challenges you." It is at such times when I begin to wonder why I ever wanted to be a teacher in the first place. If it is a demanding, low-paying, time-consuming job filled with self-doubt about knowledge and ability, why do I want to do it? Because my ego is involved. And I think if every teacher examines his motives for teaching, he will find that some of them are selfish ones. Oh, sure teachers are teachers because they like children and adolescents and want to help them grow into responsible citizens, but they also need to be needed and need to be listened to. Teaching fulfills those desires. Thus, if I am honest with myself I know that along with choosing a profession that interested me I also needed one that would satisfy my ego.

This egotism and the right to have it comes in stages, however. The teacher has to have adequate knowledge about a subject before he will be needed or listened to. Only after commanding the basic skills can apprentices such as myself go on to the more complex and prestigious duties that are the hallmarks of a master teacher. Designing my project the way I did provided me with more opportuni-

ties for this aquisition of basic skills, but I'm afraid my "greenness" still showed through and I doubt if my students learned half as much as I did from my instruction. Take, for example, the first day I taught the 104 class.

It was a rainy, misty Tuesday and weeks of research and lesson plans were finally becoming a reality. I got up early, reviewed my outline for the nth time, and left my apartment at 9 a.m. Shortly after 11 a.m. I was back at home, patting myself on the back for my accomplishment -- yet it was still a rainy, misty Tuesday. There I was, gloating over my accomplishment, while the freshmen in the class probably went on their way that day as indifferent to me as the weather. While something I had done had changed the world for me, I hadn't changed the world. I called my fiancé, my mother and my best friend to proclaim "I have taught!" and while each was pleased with my effort, none seemed to understand what I felt was the magnitude of my accomplishment. It was then when I realized that teaching is a very solitary art and rarely will anyone, not even the students in the classroom, realize exactly what a teacher does and what the process entails.

Although the lessons in the 104 class went well, I was never totally satisfied with them. While I made every effort to know all there was and more about each short story, I always felt that my teaching was somehow incomplete. I worried that I wouldn't leave my students with any "revelations" or thought-provoking ideas about the stories they had read. When I observed the class' instructor, Susan Porterfield, lecture she had always left me with such sensations, and I wanted to do the same when I taught the class.

But alas, more often than not I felt that all I could do was touch the tip of the iceberg. Whereas Susan could create ^{Captivating} "lessons with integrity" (a phrase she used often), I felt mine were rather bland. Whereas Susan seemed to just naturally flow from one topic to another, I felt confined and restricted by my outlines, notes, and text marginalia. As a consolation I did come to feel more confident and relaxed with the progression of each lesson, though, and at the end of the experience I wished I had had more lessons to teach.

My concern about my relationship with the students in the class was almost as great as my concern about my lessons. Now, I realize that not much of a relationship can develop in three weeks, yet it was important for me to have the students' respect and to have them view me as at least somewhat of a knowledgeable source on the stories I was teaching. I didn't want to be someone they half-heartedly listened to and I didn't want their main motivation for coming to class to be to avoid losing attendance points. But in light of the written feedback they gave me the last day I taught, it seems as if I did impart an understanding of the stories to them and they didn't view my "student teaching" as an intrusion. In their feedback many addressed me by my first name and wished me good luck with my career. It felt good to have their encouragement and to know that enough of a rapport had developed between us that they didn't view me as a stranger, but as Mary. I saved their feedback, along with ~~my~~ ^{the} lesson plans of the short stories I taught them. What they wrote, like what I taught, has contributed to my development as a teacher.

Susan Porterfield, however, contributed the most to my development during this segment of my project. Formerly a junior high

school English teacher and now a doctoral candidate, this small woman initially impressed me as someone who couldn't raise her voice or figuratively hurt a fly. I soon discovered that this impression was misleading. Although soft-spoken and gentle, Susan was a very intelligent and dedicated professional who could effortlessly command a classroom. She was a wonderful mentor during the eight weeks I worked with her and I thank her for releasing her class to this nervously fumbling English education major. Susan made her 104 class, a required course many students think has little value, a pleasure. She knew her material, was interested in it, and could articulately communicate her knowledge and passion to the class; as a result, students were captivated by her lectures. Although she had taught freshmen English for eight years she was not "burned out" as was Jack, the seventeen year veteran I taught with at East Aurora. By observing her in the classroom and talking to her, Susan demonstrated that teachers will not stagnate if they do not want to.

Tutoring in the Writing Lab also contributed to my professional development, but quite differently than the classroom experience had. Whereas I didn't get to establish much of a relationship with the 104 students, the more intimate setting of the Lab and the tutoring situation allowed for more personal contact between student and teacher. And while most of the work done by the "tutees" in the Lab was independent activity (i.e., revising drafts, generating ideas for essays, writing in journals), the students really benefited from having a tutor at their table, someone who would encourage them,

egg them on, and give them a boost to start them writing. Tutors also served as good sounding boards for ideas, and through dialogue they could help a student orally develop a topic before he or she began writing about it.

Probably the most interesting discovery I made about the Lab students was their remarkable ability to shuffle papers. If a tutor let them, they could easily spend ten to fifteen minutes fingering through folders and spiral notebooks looking for old essays or new essay ideas or a stray scrap of paper they claimed held their essay outline. They also handled their papers in a reverent sort of manner and often took more care with their penmanship than they did with their writing. Unlike the 104 students who would busily scribble away when asked to freewrite, the Lab students wrote in a slow, laborous and concentrated manner. They could take up to twenty minutes to write one page of spontaneous prose because they often paused to look around the room, up at the ceiling, or at their table-mates.

Yet while the Lab students were slow starters they were by no means slow thinkers. It is a mistake to assume that so-called "slow learners" are stupid people. On the contrary, these students often had mature insights; they were just handicapped by their inability to express such insights on paper. Rochelle was one such student. Rochelle was given an assignment to write about a group she belonged to that was misunderstood by those who weren't members of the group. Expecting her essay to be a clichéd piece about being black or being female, I was surprised to find that it was instead about being a teenaged fast food employee. Her essay de-

scribed how fast food franchises mistreat their young employees and noted that the smiling all-American girl on television's hamburger, chicken and taco commercials is not a representative image of the typical worker. More often than not, claimed Rochelle, the employees were tired kids who had long shifts ahead of them and too much homework waiting at home. And although Rochelle's essay was marred by Black English Vernacular errors, her piece of writing was effective. She stated her case and stated it relatively well, and as a result I did sympathize with the teenaged employees of fast food restaurants.

Tony was another example of an imaginative writer. Instead of writing mundane daily entries in his journal, he wrote chapters of a science fiction mystery novel. Keeping his journal in this fashion provided him with an interesting project and a good way to improve his writing skills. When reading his journal one could tell that he had written rough drafts of his chapters before entering them into his composition book, and this served to teach him that composing is an ever-evolving process of writing and revising.

Perhaps just as enlightening as my tutoring experiences was my opportunity to talk with other Lab tutors one afternoon during a meeting in which they exchanged teaching ideas. The meeting was a successful "share session" of suggestions and situations the tutors had experienced while working in the Lab. All the tutors were very supportive of my teaching project and the Lab Director, Ellen Franklin, was especially encouraging. She made many materials available to me. I eagerly read the theoretical books she lent me

and copied many exercises in workbooks for future reference. Thus, while the Lab gave me an opportunity to form one-to-one teaching relationships with the students, it also gave me a chance to share my views on education with other comrades in the field and to enlarge my worksheet repertoire. While it did not, in comparison to the 104 class, involve as much personal risk or mental exertion, it was still a very profitable experience and a good way to observe how effective learning can occur in an individual setting.

Such were my observations, experiences and emotions during my semester-long experiment in which I was both the scientist and the guinea pig. As for what I learned as a result of the experience, the lessons were subtle reinforcements rather than dramatic revelations, reinforcements which added to the knowledge already attained through methods courses and student teaching. Yet, without a doubt, they were very important lessons which functioned as fine-tuning mechanisms. Susan Porterfield's philosophy of teaching with integrity is an example of such fine-tuning.

While I knew that a teacher should always be prepared for a lesson, Susan demonstrated the power of tightly organized instruction. With lessons like this not only will students leave a class knowing that they learned something, the teacher will gain respect for himself and his material. Susan's "integrity" also proved the point that a lesson should be engineered to demonstrate a specific theme, and any information that does not contribute to this purpose should be discarded. Hence, time should not be wasted on meaningless filler activities and discourse.

The 104 class and Lab experience have again confirmed the fact that students must be encouraged to write, and to write regularly. Be it freewriting, journal writing or the more formal essay, writing helps students organize their thoughts and prepares them for lengthier composition assignments. Both experiences also reinforced the notion that teachers must ask students for their responses to the material. Instructors who dictate their opinions to a class are not only dogmatic and boring, they also fail to promote student discussion, an essential discovery tool.

Sitting in on the Lab tutors' meeting and reading the materials Ellen lent me dramatically demonstrated that if learning is a continual process, so is teaching. It is essential to keep abreast of research and techniques in order to better meet the needs of students and teachers. It is also just as important for teachers to share ideas and experiences; the classroom is the best testing ground for new approaches and fellow teachers are the best support system.

More important than all these observations, however, was the fact that this experience reaffirmed my faith in my fellow teachers. Susan and Ellen and the tutors in the Writing Lab demonstrated that not all educators are tired drudges disenchanted with "the system" to the point of simply mechanically going through the motions of teaching. There are dynamic and dedicated people out there, quietly going about their job of educating, and while there are certainly too few of them, they do exist. And I don't believe that those that I observed exist because they are teaching in a university setting, what many would call a sheltered environ-

ment more conducive to education. These individuals would take their enthusiasm and interest with them wherever they went. It is a part of them. Besides, if teaching college freshmen or tutoring students with sixth grade reading abilities isn't a prime burn-out opportunity for a college instructor, I don't know what is. Thus, while student teaching at East Aurora gave me a shocking dose of unpleasant reality, "student teaching" at NIU restored my educational idealism. It's great to have it back.

Mary Sullivan
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Annotated Bibliography

The following is an annotated bibliography of works consulted before teaching these five stories in Susan Porterfield's English 104 class: Frank O'Connor's "Guests of the Nation," Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal," Stephen Crane's "Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," and Ursula LeGuin's "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas." The annotated bibliography is organized according to the order that the stories were taught, which is also the order they are listed in above.

With the exception of the Crane piece, it was difficult to find specific criticisms of the stories; instead, bits and pieces had to be gathered from one source and another. This lack of specific story criticism can possibly be attributed to the fact that Frank O'Connor was a popular Irish writer but extensive work may not have been done on him outside his native country, that Ralph Ellison's "Battle Royal" is not a short story at all but the first chapter from his novel Invisible Man, and that many critics regard Kurt Vonnegut and Ursula LeGuin as "pop" writers, writers of science fiction and fantasy, a genre that they feel cannot be taken seriously.

While many of the criticisms I did find were helpful, I soon discovered that secondary materials cannot replace

first-hand experience with the story itself. Thus, while the bibliographic materials did add to my understanding of the stories, my most valuable knowledge was gained by simply sitting down with the work itself and analyzing it on my own.

"Guests of the Nation"

Averill, Deborah. "Human Contact in the Short Stories." In Michael/Frank: Studies on Frank O'Connor. Ed. Maurice Sheehy. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.

This essay offers a survey of O'Connor's most popular short stories, including "Guests of the Nation." It focuses on O'Connor's interest in human isolation and determinism as it pertains to characterization in his stories. Very helpful.

Briden, Earl F. "'Guests of the Nation': A Final Irony." In Studies in Short Fiction, 13 (1976), pp. 79-81.

Briden asserts that "Guests of the Nation" is more than the story of war's effects on a young soldier. Rather, its "crowning glory" is the author's larger ironic framework of historical judgement. Briden claims O'Connor created fictional character Jerimiah Donovan as a parallel to real-life/^{Irish} revolutionary O'Donovan Rossa. Briden offers interesting insights, but as he is more concerned with the historical significance of the story and characters than the story itself, he was only somewhat helpful.

Matthews, James. Voices: A Life of Frank O'Connor. New York: Atheneum Press, 1983.

An interesting but far too detailed book for my purposes. Matthews offers nothing short of a step-by-step biography of Frank O'Connor. He deals with Guests of the Nation as a volume of short stories, but not with the short story "Guests of the Nation" itself.

Tomroy, William. Frank O'Connor. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980.

Chapter Two of Tomroy's book, "First Directions," deals with O'Connor's early writings, his short story collection Guests of the Nation (containing "Guests of the Nation") being among these works. Tomroy states that "Guests of the Nation," O'Connor's most popular and most anthologized story, is "quite simply one of the most eloquent commentaries on the inhumanity of war." Tomroy cites character, plot, theme and diction as the most important aspects of the story and gives examples of each. This was the best piece of "Guests of the Nation" criticism and analysis that I came across.

Wohlgelerter, Maurice. Frank O'Connor: An Introduction. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.

A good introductory text for the life of Frank O'Connor. "Partiotic Frenzy," the second chapter in this book, deals with O'Connor's own personal involvement in the Irish war for independence from Britain and his interest in what he saw as man's innate impulse for violence. A good source for helping to highlight

the moral issues and dilemmas in "Guests of the Nation" as well as the entire war story collection, Guests of the Nation.

"Battle Royal"

Ellison, Ralph. Invisible Man. New York: Modern Library, 1947. The prologue and second chapter of this novel are indispensable to understanding the first chapter of the book, reproduced and retitled "Battle Royal" in our class text. The prologue explains why Ellison's narrator refers to himself as an invisible man, and the second chapter follows-up on the first chapter's allusion to the narrator's college experience. Invaluable for a fuller understanding of the short story and Ellison's way of thinking.

Gottesman, Ronald, ed. Studies in the Invisible Man. Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1971.

The thing that distinguishes this collection of critical essays from others on the Invisible Man is the editor's inclusion of an interview with Ralph Ellison. Ellison denies that Invisible Man is an autobiographical work, but does admit that "Battle Royal"'s fight scene in which the narrator is blindfolded is representative of the Southern caste system which Blacks and Whites both thoughtlessly accept. Helpful and interesting.

Mizener, Arthur. Handbook to Modern Short Stories: The Uses of the Imagination. New York: W.W. Norton Company, 1967.

Mizener summarizes the story, suggests ten possible questions to use when discussing the short story in class, and asserts that

Ellison's "Battle Royal," like Invisible Man, combines social realism and moral symbolism to make its statement about the black man's life in the 1950's. Moderately useful, but this doesn't reveal anything that anyone's own in-depth analysis would not uncover.

O'Meally, Robert G. The Craft of Ralph Ellison. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

O'Meally gives a very good background to Ellison and his experiences which parallel very closely to the narrator's experiences in "Battle Royal" and Invisible Man. This book is necessary to understand the experiences of blacks and Ellison in the 1940's and 1950's. It gives insight into why Ellison might have written Invisible Man.

Reilly, John M., ed. Twentieth Century Interpretations of Invisible Man: A Collection of Critical Essays.

Two essays, "The Symbolism of Vision," (Charles I. Glicksberg) and "The Rebirth of the Artist," (Ellen Horowitz) deal with "Battle Royal" in some detail, but are more concerned with it as a developmental stepping-stone for the narrator in Invisible Man than as an individual work. The introduction to the book, however, which is by editor John Reilly, is very informative about Ellison's life. Recommended for Reilly's introduction.

"Bride Comes to Yellow Sky"

Barnes, Robert. "Crane's 'Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,'" In Explicator, 16 (1959), Item 39..

A short, five paragraph item which doesn't detail anything but does point out the East versus West conflict in "Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" and touches on Crane's use of characterization. Moderately useful.

Cook, Robert G. "Stephen Crane's 'Bride Comes to Yellow Sky.'" In Studies in Short Fiction 2, (1965), pp. 368-9.

Cook focuses on the image of Scratchy Wilson shuffling off at the close of the story making "funnel-shaped tracks in the heavy sand," and proposes that the entire story is based on a funnel structure, the end being a societal and marital convergence. This was a little too analytical for my purposes.

Ferguson, S.C. "Crane's 'Bride Comes to Yellow Sky.'" In Explicator, 21 (1963), Item 59.

Ferguson criticizes Barnes' interpretation of the Crane story, saying that there is no allegorical East versus West level of meaning and that the cultural conflict in the story only provides a setting, not a parallel, for the literal level of the story. The true theme, Ferguson suggests, is in section IV of the piece, when Potter and Scratchy both realize that they must put away their childish playthings and grow up. This is an interesting viewpoint, but one I see as a side-note to Barnes.

Tibbetts, A.M. "Stephen Crane's 'Bride Comes to Yellow Sky.'" In English Journal, 54 (1965), pp. 314-316.

Tibbetts asserts that Crane's main purpose in "Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" is to create comic characters, not to write serious allegory. Like Mark Twain, Ambrose Bierce, and Bret Harte,

Tibbetts says Crane's use of exaggeration and understatement is misinterpreted. An interesting, if not altogether agreeable, view.

"Harrison Bergeron"

Klinkowitz, Jerome. "A Do-It-Yourself Story Collection by Kurt Vonnegut." In Vonnegut in America: An Introduction to the Life and Work of Kurt Vonnegut. Jerome Klinkowitz and Donald Lawlor, eds. New York: Delacorte Press, 1977.

Klinkowitz says much about Vonnegut's struggle to publish his short stories but virtually nothing about the short stories themselves. Disappointing.

Schatt, Stanley. Kurt Vonnegut. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976.

This book focuses more on Vonnegut's novels than his short stories, but one chapter, "Short Stories," devotes a few paragraphs to each of Vonnegut's stories. "Harrison Bergeron" is classified as a political fable, and while analysis of the story is limited to just one paragraph, it does mention theme. Somewhat helpful.

Vonnegut, Kurt. Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloon (Opinions). New York: Delacorte Press, 1965.

Vonnegut speaks a little about his work, but this is mostly a light-hearted and flippant book about what he finds interesting in everyday life. Not very helpful.

Vonnegut, Kurt. Welcome to the Monkey House. New York: Delacorte Press, 1950.

This is the collection "Harrison Bergeron" originally appeared in.

Helpful to read a few other stories in this collection, plus the author's preface, which gives some insight into Vonnegut's personality and story themes.

"The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

Bucknall, Barbara. Ursula K. LeGuin. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1981.

Chapter Seven, "Mainly Short Stories," briefly mentions "Omelas" and touches on William James' "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" where the issue in "Omelas" -- the question whether one should suffer for the benefit of others -- comes from. A fair source.

LeGuin, Ursula. The Wind's Twelve Quarters. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1975.

The Wind's Twelve Quarters is a collection of short stories, "Omelas" among them, each with a brief introduction by the author. The introduction to "Omelas" is short but nonetheless valuable because LeGuin talks about William James' and Dostoyevsky's influence on ~~this~~ the short story. She also explains (truthfully?) what Omelas means -- it's part of Salem, Oregon spelled backwards.

LeGuin, Ursula. The Left Hand of Darkness. New York: Ace Books, 1969.

Interesting for LeGuin's introduction to this Hugo award-winning novel (the award for outstanding science fiction). LeGuin discusses science fiction's values in her essay, and writes that science

fiction carries things to their logical conclusion, which is why non-sci fi fans find this fantasy either escapist or depressing. Interesting to get LeGuin's views on her art.

Spivack, Charolette. Ursula K. LeGuin. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984.

More concerned with LeGuin's novels than her short stories, Spivack only offers a one paragraph summary of "Omelas" and includes no analysis or criticism.