

The Art of Teaching

- Valerie Sayers -

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Because I mean to talk today about the ways writing and teaching can both be the practice of an art, I begin with an admission of how daunting I find both arts. Thomas Mann famously says, “A writer is somebody for whom writing is more difficult than it is for other people,” but to that I add that this year’s teaching award winner is somebody for whom teaching is more difficult. I begin every semester in a complicated state of dread and anticipation, the same contradictory impulses that visit me when I embark on a new novel. Every fall, I experience the standard dream many of my colleagues surely know well: I appear before my class in a state of partial nudity, having forgotten everything I ever knew. I was greatly consoled when my colleague Don Sniegowski, himself a winner of the Sheedy Award, allowed that his start-of-semester nightmares, too, worsened as the years went by. But, nightmares of exposure notwithstanding, I’m well aware that art also brings tremendous pleasure to the artist, that I would not still be entering the classroom hyperventilating every fall if I didn’t also sing down the hall after a good class, nor would I still be writing if filling a blank screen didn’t involve some measure of elation.

It is not fashionable, perhaps, to speak of teaching as an art. These days we speak more and more of teaching as quantifiable: we must measure, test, count our change, pocket our receipts. Accountability’s the name of the 21st century education game, and fair enough: we *should* be clear about our expectations; we *should* deliver the goods. But lately we give too much weight to the numbers, to TCEs and SATs and GPAs, to what is the easiest variable to calculate in that complicated equation between teacher and student. Teaching is, after all, not just a matter of content-delivery but of intellectual and personal connection.

The art we practice in the classroom begins with performance, and whether the performance is a lecture or a demonstration or a sustained line of Socratic questioning, the moment when the performer—the teacher—is *on* is akin to the moment of immersion in any art: consciousness becomes charged, souped-up, wide awake. That moment when

we connect with a class (or with a single pair of eyes) is akin to that moment in writing when language appears to be summoning itself. I don't mean to romanticize either art—to suggest that we must become practitioners of some new age art religion, to reach a state of automatic writing or automatic teaching—because of course, getting to that point of immersion is the workaday business of discipline, study, conceptualization. But I do want to suggest that, like all art, teaching requires not just the hard work of preparation but the tightrope moments of risk and improvisation. It has to be willing to hazard the stupefied moment of silence, of embarrassment even, that sometimes occurs when students and teachers alike adjust to a new idea.

We are sometimes called upon to make our students uncomfortable. Teaching well, like practicing any art well, often means entering unfamiliar territory, adjusting our angle of vision. Art is an alternative way of perceiving, and alternative modes are sometimes...unsettling. The last couple of times I've taught a university seminar, a course in the American short story from 1900 to the present, I've asked my students to consider Susan Sontag's notion that "real art should have the capacity to make us nervous." Many of them are resistant to this idea, to say the least: they have only just arrived in their first university seminar and they are already plenty nervous. Many argue for art that affirms their own values, that embodies some vague idea of beauty or some much more specific idea of action-laden plot. They are above all looking for pleasure, and well they should be: that is not at odds, I tell them, with Sontag's desire for upheaval. They are dubious. By mid-semester, however, we have read some elegant fiction about some of the United States of America's grittiest subjects: William Carlos Williams gives them a tough-talking pediatrician practicing among the immigrant poor, the drunken, the criminally resourceful; Jean Toomer depicts a lynching in lyrical prose; Edwidge Danticat introduces them to lonely Haitians, working double shifts, crowded in Brooklyn basements. We are looking for how the form of each story reconciles itself to the content, for how Williams's wry dialogue, running into his prose without so much as a dash to set it off, tells us something about his times and his politics. We are questioning why Toomer's lush poetic prose suddenly goes staccato when it describes the burning of a black man. We are defining our own aesthetics, aiming for a point where we can conceive of Kierkegaard's "absolute harmony of content and form" in the context of

some deeply disturbing content, and we find that we are, finally, doing the conceiving with intense pleasure.

We practice the discipline of close reading in the context of a national history that may be hazy even to sophisticated Notre Dame students. In my Southern Fiction class one year, as we read stories about civil rights protests, I showed pictures of Freedom Day in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. One of my white students came from that area, and she said, “I don’t think we had marches like that.” “There it is,” I said: the caption read *Hattiesburg, 1964*. The look on her face as she examined the photo was, in turn, bemused, unsettled, pleased. “That wasn’t so long before I was born,” she said. “Wouldn’t you think somebody could have *mentioned* it?” It’s our job, in the classroom, to do the mentioning, to suggest intellectual possibilities heretofore unreported, unimagined.

And to do that, whether in a literature class or in a fiction writing workshop, I find myself challenged again and again by the need to imagine myself as what we in literary criticism call The Other. It is one thing to do that in my writing, as I sit solitary, safe, in front of the keyboard, and quite another in the classroom, looking out on a roomful of baseball caps turned backward. Teaching is a collaborative art—and while that is a great relief for those of us who also practice a solitary art, it brings its own difficulties. It is sometimes hard to give ourselves over to our students’ arguments, to really hear what they have to say: after all, we are the authorities. I recently heard the theologian Stanley Hauerwas say that he told his graduate students he wasn’t interested in discussing their opinions until he had finished training them.¹ Then their opinions would be worth something. I understand that authoritarian impulse—I had quite enough of “the blind leading the blind,” as Flannery O’Connor referred to writing workshops, in my own education—but I know too that I neglect my students’ opinions at my own peril. Semester after semester, I am stunned by a student’s insight, by an angle I had never considered in a text I thought I knew well; grateful for a student’s slow articulation of an idea so clear to me that I had not troubled to explain it clearly. And anyone who’s ever run a classroom discussion knows that the art of keeping a discussion balanced means

that conversation flows not just from professor to student but from student to student, that in convincing the resistant of a new idea, the authority of a fellow student often exceeds, I regret, the authority of the professor.

And it is, almost paradoxically, in that realm—the student-to-student realm—that we who teach at Notre Dame must commit to change in one crucial regard. Our student body is not sufficiently diverse in ethnic or in economic terms. Forgive me for stating the obvious. This is a reality we all face: professors know it, our deans know it, the president of our university speaks of it regularly. Our students, in their graduation surveys, mention lack of diversity as a disappointment. When I walked into my first class at Notre Dame ten years ago, a writing workshop of fifteen students, I faced a roomful of recessive genes. I could have been attending my own Irish-American family reunion. I was, you might say, right at home, and yet I found the phenomenon disturbing, especially at a Catholic university.

In my American literature classes, the students with the dominant genes carry an extra assignment. Semester after semester, I have one African-American student enrolled with twenty-five white students in a class on Southern Fiction. During a conference, I thanked a student for her patience in classroom conversations, and she said something along the lines of: “I don’t always feel patient when white students are explaining the black experience to me.” In a freshman seminar, we read a story about Chinese-Americans and there was an almost comic movement of eyes to the one Asian-American sitting around our square. “Don’t look at me,” she said. “In the first place I’m Korean, and in the second place, my parents are white. I don’t know anything about Chinese people.” Many of my fiction writing students, for reasons clear to anybody living in the 21st century, can’t wait to write a hip-hop story set in a housing project, even if they come from—especially when they come from—first-rate suburban high schools. This is all grounds for fruitful classroom discussion and a good opportunity for teaching the literatures of class and race and the responsibilities of writers who imagine themselves into other identities, but my work would be immeasurably enriched by the presence of more black and brown students in the classroom, by more first-generation college

¹ Hauerwas made the comment as an aside during his plenary address to the *Image/Lilly* Fellows Conference “A Narratable World: The Theological Implications of Story,” at Seattle Pacific

students, by students from the Ozarks and the inner city as well as from Grosse Point. At Notre Dame, once thought of in the popular imagination as the university of those pesky Catholic ethnic working class types, only eight per cent of our students today are first-generation students. Some of the most moving pieces of art I've seen on this campus are films by students who are in a lonely minority: one depicts a young woman on scholarship frustrated by fellow students who don't understand why she can't afford to go to the dorm dance; another, a documentary, turns the camera on African-American students who tell the viewer that no, they're not athletes.²

Like many faculty members, I've been carping about the lack of diversity since I arrived, and have felt the frustrations of change so slow it sometimes seems glacial. Yet there has been measurable change in my ten years here. I walk across campus now and on a good day I can *see* a more diverse student body. When I read a defense of affirmative action in the *Chicago Sun-Times* this summer by our director of admissions, Daniel Saracino, I was heartened to see a Notre Dame administrator out front, clear and impassioned on behalf of a crucial principle. I think my colleague Erskine Peters, who fought so hard for a real black presence on this campus, would be excited by the intellectual vitality the Peters Fellows have brought to our college, and I know he would be pleased by the growth and momentum of the African and African-American Studies Program. The Institute for Latino Studies is thriving. This is a hopeful moment, but also the moment when we have to be honest about how far we have to go and when, if we are to see teaching as the collaborative art that must take responsibility for its collaborations, we have to make a big push. I propose that we who teach at Notre Dame commit to diversity in a small but tangible way. I am grateful to Dean Mark Roche for agreeing to mark this occasion and this year's Sheedy Award with a donation that will enable us to begin a faculty and staff scholarship fund for under-represented students: for ethnic minorities and the economically disadvantaged.

Shortly after I came to Notre Dame, Joseph Russo, the director of financial aid, spoke to a Faculty Senate committee on which I sat. I was impressed by his candor as he

University, November 8.

² The undergraduate films are "This Is Jane," by Angie Statz and John Sierros and "College U," by Jeremy Rall and Bryan Bucks, Department of Film, Television & Theatre; Jill Godmilow, supervising faculty.

described the tough burden many of our students carried: the weight of their student loans. I was also moved by his empathy; here was an administrator who could imagine, and take upon himself, our students' realities. Under his leadership, the financial aid situation has steadily improved—today we are able to meet the full financial need of all our admitted students—but we still meet much of that need with student loans, and Mr. Russo is still eloquent on the subject of how burdensome that debt can be. Notre Dame admits more under-represented students each year, but what we offer in financial aid directly affects how many of those students we can actually enroll. Offering packages with higher loan amounts and lower scholarships than other schools makes us non-competitive: as you probably know, Princeton has committed to meet its students' full financial needs without any student loans, and other schools have substantially lowered their students' debt burdens. For low-income families, borrowing large sums for college is not just discouraging but, as Mr. Russo says, sometimes unimaginable. It is one thing for an upper- middle-class student to graduate with \$20,000 worth of student loans and quite another for a student whose entire family income is \$20,000.

And we need the brightest students from every background for this collaborative art we practice in the classrooms of Notre Dame. It is my hope that we faculty, alongside the staff who make our teaching possible, will be able to contribute, however modestly, to a payroll deduction for this scholarship fund. We will remind ourselves, I hope, of the community we are at this moment and of the community we hope to be, and perhaps that reminder will move us to take other steps as well.

I am going to close by reading you the opening of an M.F.A. student's wonderful novel. I am cheating a little by reading a graduate student's work, because the Sheedy Award honors undergraduate teaching—but I hope to suggest the riches that competitive scholarships bring. Notre Dame alumnus Nicholas Sparks has given the Creative Writing Program a magnificent gift, and one of its components is an annual fellowship, which we used this year to lure Angela Hur, a Harvard graduate, to Notre Dame. The Sparks Fellowship is not designated for anyone other than the best writer we can find, but by great good fortune, its first two recipients are from under-represented groups: Kelly Kerney, an undergraduate at Bowdoin, included in her application a compelling statement about being the first in her family to attend college, and at Notre Dame has already

completed a compelling novel—soon to be published, I feel certain—about her fundamentalist background. Angela Hur is the second Sparks fellow, and when we read her application, we knew that we would have to compete for her presence. I think you will see why in this prologue to the novel she is presently completing:

A family name carries with it a history and the power to mold one's destiny. So, Bo-Kyung Kim gave his children two. He gave each of his three children an American surname to balance their Korean one. His first-born son was named Goldberg Kim and his second, MacArthur Kim. It was his way of making recompense for the ancestral name he passed on to them that would brand them indefinitely, undeniably Korean. Common names are for common people, the father said to his children. I give you the chance to be something uncommon.

For his first son, the father wished for great wealth, but Carnegie? Vanderbilt? How could he yell at his son if he couldn't pronounce his name? He remembered reading the story of Isaac Goldberg who came to America with only a pair of scissors and in a lifetime established a chain of department stores in New York. Of course, Isaac's grandchildren squandered all his wealth, but Bo-Kyung Kim did not read to the end of the story to discover this. Besides, Kim itself means gold, so the double weight of value would surely mark his son as desirable to this world.

For his second son then, he wished for might, and thus MacArthur Kim was born. His wife would tell the children how an American general with four stars on his shoulder divided her country. The boys imagined a John Wayne figure tearing stars from the sky and hurling them down with one hand, splitting the earth into moveable pieces. But more powerful than this man, said this mother, was MacArthur, who, if that cowardly Truman hadn't stood in his way, could have kept their country whole as it had been for thousands of years. So their second son was named for his bold and brilliant vision, for what might-have-been.

The two sons were imported to the U.S. when they were toddlers, renamed before their father would touch them again, his hands forming skull caps for them both—his approximation of an embrace suitable for young men. After ten years the third child, a daughter, was added to the family, the first true American. The mother tried to sidestep her husband. She wanted her named Jacqueline in honor of Mrs. Onassis, who was not only elegant but married well, and then married better. "Her name will be Jackie," she whispered to her baby, but her husband said, "You stupid woman, that's not a family name!" and he wrote down Kennedy Kim on the birth certificate.

It delights me that, on this campus which lists thirty-nine *Kennedys* on its online directory, we now have a Kennedy Kim among us, fictional but nonetheless real. Angela

Hur's writing shows us, with wit, grace, and a sharp intelligence, that our students have much to teach us: they are indeed our collaborators in this art of teaching.