

My Last Semester

I'll tell you one thing: I didn't mean to do it.

I was getting by. My students still liked me—understanding mostly of what they joked about either behind my back or openly. Oh sure, I was letting some little things go: assignments, grades, my personal hygiene. But I could have got it back; I know I could have. I always did before!

Let me explain how it was, if I can. But, maybe nobody knows what it's like to be classroom teacher unless they've done it. People say, "Summers off...all those holidays...leave at 3:00 everyday." But they don't know what it's like to face that expectant, unruly, open, changing, sometimes explosive, and demanding classroom audience day after day. I have had desk jobs and labor jobs, so I know the difference. And I tell you, there's nothing to compare to the demands of classroom teaching.

When teachers have a "non-instructional day" we consider it a day off, even though we likely do more desk work on one of those days than 95% of all other office-types, from accountants to lawyers to bankers to politicians to secretaries.

It's never easy. There are always a million things to do, and there is always that classroom waiting for us four times a day with 80 minutes of class time to fill. It's brutally demanding. We are always on and always active in the clutch of movement with the responsibility of saving lives, resolving conflict, assigning grades, shaping the future, etc. And we don't have the time to do everything that we should be or could be doing.

Maybe that's the worst: that crushed idealism. That gut-twisting realization that no matter how hard we work or how many hours we put in or how smart we think we are, we are never finished; we never arrive. Yet we can see the answer so clearly behind the bullshit. We know what it would take to succeed. But nobody listens: as if we don't know what we are taking about, and worse yet, as if we are concerned only with our own self-interest.

This term they gave me four classes to teach. More than 120 students: one class of ELA 30-1, two ELA 20-2, and one ELA 30-2. My 30-1 class had 36 students in it!

Of-course, I complained to the administration. The principal, a short, ex-jock with a hard, shining baldhead, told me to "relax, there's nothing we can do" and "to wait until the students drop out," and to "try some different marking methods" etc.

I should have simmered down, but I couldn't: I saw other "important" classes such as CALM 20 and lab sciences with enrolment caps of 20 students. I felt I had to stand up for ELA 30-1. Anyone should be able to see how heartbreakingly important this course is and how placing more than 30 students in it is stupid, vicious, and insane!

I sent a few emails criticizing school policy and even lost my cool once or twice in the staff room and principal's office. So I was called into the human resource office (with a union rep) as they threatened to plan an "exit strategy" for me. They said I was too hostile! They said I was too unprofessional! They said I couldn't work with them! They arranged a couple of meetings with resource people about my behavior. They wore false smiles and feigned care. Their bleak walls of policy made their humanity akin to Styrofoam stuffing, and it filled me with disgust I could taste. I wanted to spit it back into their painted-on, licorice-confection faces.

I had been at this school longer than most: nearly twenty-five years. And every year, it had seemed to get worse. Was anyone taking notice what was happening to education? Lager classes, less services, more responsibilities, stagnant wages, bloated administration, etc.

Why do I get this way? Why can't I stop? Why must I continue to rail against injustice like some self-righteous Hamlet?

Why can't I let it go? Why must I be so damn bothered?

Does it matter? Does anything outside of food, shelter, and clothing matter?

What are we? What purpose do we serve?

I always drank: socially, recreationally, celebratory, consolatory, etc. But, this term I crossed the line, I know. In those dreary drunken moments, I sometimes would recapture a vivid image: an idea, what I was, what I meant, what I knew was important. But soon the term was nearly over. My grade book only had a few entries; I was horribly hung-over nearly every day; I started sneaking a few shots at noon hour from a mickey in my desk—what was happening to me?

And I knew that they were on my trail of broken dreams this time, making things much worse. I felt as if they wanted to destroy me by making me admit personal failure: but in truth I gave and gave, I tell you! I GAVE! I was trying to stand up for what's right!

Steven, my long-time, long-suffering, fellow teaching buddy, told me to not back down; he said, "Tell them where to go. They can't do anything to you. Be strong. All you have done is said what we all are feeling. Just leave it at that. You've done no wrong."

But I simply let go. After hanging on to that icy ledge with torn fingernails by charm, personality, shaky belief, and hope—I let go. Steven didn't know how close I was to dropping off that ledge. Nobody knew. Even I didn't know.

So now I'm on stress leave. And I tell you again: I didn't mean to do it. I didn't mean to get violent when the principal asked to speak to me about my term. It happened too fast for meaning or second-thought; Hamlet says, "Readiness is all," and maybe I was finally good and ready.

I followed him into his office and he asked me to sit down—he needed to talk to me. But somehow instead of sitting down, I faced him directly and grabbed him by his school-issue sweatshirt and told him, “I have had enough talking!”

I wanted him to listen, to suffer, to feel *something*, damn it! I didn’t want to scare him—or hurt him. But as I gripped his soft gray T-shirt with my left hand and he struggled to get away, I swung my right fist hard as I could into the center of his face hitting him somewhere between his nose, mouth, and cheek. It felt hard yet squishy on my knuckles and sounded just like it does in the movies.

For such a tough jock, he offered no real resistance; bright red blood started smearing out of his nose and some from his mouth. Maybe he thought a wimpy English teacher would never dare take him on physically, and as a result was too shocked to react?

So I was then able to hold him with both hands and continue my searing frenzy. I shook him like some unfortunate idiot as he began yelling at me and begging me to calm down. But for once I felt a brief advantage: I had him in my grip, so I pushed my gains and rammed him and his bald head so hard against the door that it brought the secretary out of her stupor at the front desk. She had run to his door and was now screaming “Oh MY GOD Oh MY GOD!..,”

I was still raging and ramming his body up against his door saying “It’s not fair, you stupid idiot, it’s not fair...listen to me, listen to me...”

I then saw his terrorized and depthless eyes, and I realized what I was doing—he was just another victim (not my real enemy). So I let him go suddenly and started walking away! He thankfully let me go, telling the hysterical secretary not to follow. I kept walking out of the building in a daze. The school seemed familiar, but not friendly or knowable any longer. The bricks were frowning at me—giving me the farewell they must give all failures who leave this place.

One student at the parking lot door said something to me about not being ready for the final exams and asked what she could do to get better grades. I smiled at her friendly-like and said with my characteristic irony, “Do your homework.” And I was gone.

So who am I now? Where did this get me?

My classes had to be finished by a sub; I had no real marks for the students: no lesson, unit, or year plans. I spent a weekend in the psych ward while my concerned family came by to visit. I joked that I knew I was crazy to go into teaching in the first place, and now I have the medical proof for it.

Last week they prescribed a new mood drug. But, I’m not taking it right. I swallow several pills at a time or none at all. I drift in and out of good and bad classroom memories; I alternate between blame, hurt, anger, relief, and sleepy numbness. I still

have my scotch, most of my pride, my Hamlet, my grammar....and I tell you again, I didn't mean to do it.

I didn't want this to be my last semester.

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