



## HE DRESSED THE PART

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*Alice S. Horning*

When I first saw him, I was waiting in the hall outside his classroom. Though his time was up, his class went on and on and on. I was waiting outside with other students for my class, in the next hour. He had a beard, wore glasses and a corduroy jacket with patches at the elbows; later I would see him walking home from campus across a bridge, slim and earnest, in a cape. He smoked a pipe, fiddling with it during class. He dressed the part of the consummate English professor, but more than that, he lived the part and taught me most of what I know that really matters about what makes great teaching, what is important for students and how to achieve excellence in the classroom. Though I still find his talent somewhat mysterious, my four years of college study with this gifted teacher have inspired my teaching and shaped my career.

### *My First Year*

I had my professor for about half of my courses in my undergraduate major, beginning with the second half of freshman honors English in the second semester of my freshman year. The other four semesters were after my first year, and, actually, I didn't get into his class until my major adjustment to college was over. The first term, though, I was a typical first-year

student: I only occasionally went to some classes, slept through others (Art History after lunch with the room dark for slide showing was an invitation to nap), and was ill-prepared for Calculus. Once I got into his class, which I did first by engineering a math conflict with a useless English class to which I was assigned, and then by just asking if I could join his class, I cleaned up my act quite a bit. One example of my improved approach to school was that his class had read D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* the first term, and after several mentions in class, I took it upon myself to read the novel on my own.

Perhaps one of the first individual conversations I had with him was about that book. I was already hooked on him and on college, but so many of the things that happened relate to my status as a first-year student. The literature on what is now called the First Year Experience, arising from the work of John Gardner and his colleagues at the FYE Foundation at the University of South Carolina, captures some of what happened to me and why good teaching made such a difference to my success in the first year. Gardner's research on the first year of college shows that the single most important factor that contributes to student success in the first year is student-faculty interaction, because it helps students to see faculty positively and to get used to the idea of talking to faculty outside of class, for reasons other than being in some kind of trouble. My talk with my professor about *Sons and Lovers* certainly did both of these things. I know I had questions about the book's plot and characters, and also questions about how the novel fit with ideas we were discussing in class on other works.

My reading of the novel on my own began a lifetime love of Lawrence's work and I went on to read every novel, all the poems and short stories and quite recently, a full biography of Lawrence as well as one of his wife. More than this, reading Lawrence gave me entrée to the rich period, from 1880 to 1940 or so, when so much was happening in art, in psychology, in literature. A few years ago when I read Peter Gay's biography of Freud, who lived and worked in this period and influenced Lawrence greatly, I was struck again by what a wonder-

ful period this was on both sides of the ocean. The initial conversation with my professor was the launch of all of this reading and thinking, and one key feature of his talent was his understanding of the broad context of literature, which influenced how I engaged in reading Lawrence, Joyce, modern British and American literature, and much of everything else. In addition, though, the first conversation led to many others, about my writing, about my choice of courses and teachers, and ultimately, about my choice of graduate school and career. In some ways, everything I think about what constitutes really good teaching arises from what I experienced with him and learned from him about what goes on in the classroom, about the shape of the material and about the most effective ways to work with students.

Not long after I joined his first year course, he brought a pickle to class, an effective stunt that got our attention. He wanted to make a point about Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard*. One of the characters eats a cucumber on stage, a radical act when the play was first staged. To illustrate, when we discussed the relevant passage, he pulled the pickle out of his pocket and started eating it. Needless to say, he got a big laugh. I have never forgotten this episode or the point. A few years ago, when I sought him out to ask a question I knew he could answer, the contact led to a lunch meeting, about thirty years after my graduation from college. In that conversation, he told me of another teaching gambit, involving a complicated legal case that hinged on a large sum of money in a small box. The details are lost to me, and he said they are sometimes lost on his current students, but they remember the box and the legal issue.

This first of my teachers also served as my academic adviser, a position I asked him to take when I realized that the person I had been originally assigned to was of no help, while my professor seemed to know the answers to everything. In particular, he seemed to know something about great teaching and great teachers. His general advice was to take one's courses with "good people" and not worry so much about

exactly which courses to take. When I asked how I could know who the “good people” were, he said that a good teacher is someone who has something to teach you and someone from whom you can learn. This description certainly fit my experience with him because it was clear to me from the beginning that he had plenty to teach me; it was the reason I took half of my courses toward my major with him.

But he was also someone from whom I could learn. It wasn't just that he dressed the part, though that was some of it. What appealed to me from outside his classroom door is that he looked like I thought an English professor was supposed to look, and his sartorial approach was in sharp contrast to that of my assigned teacher that first term. That guy always looked like he had slept in his clothes and had rolled out of bed five minutes before appearing in front of us. But there was a contrast in content too: my first instructor once dragged the class through a long explication of a sonnet, forcing an interpretation of it as a poem of eight lines with a main idea, followed by the remaining six lines as a second unit. After about forty minutes, I raised my hand and proposed an alternate analysis of the poem as three quatrains (four line units) and a couplet (two lines) at the end. Naturally, my proposal made much more sense as the rhyme scheme clearly formed these sections. He agreed with me, and at that point, it was clear to me that THAT guy had nothing to teach me and that he was not someone from whom I could learn.

I wanted a guy who not only looked the part of an English professor, but could play the part as well. In another part of the course, my professor asked us to consider how Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex* would appear if it were performed in front of the White House, creating what Ken Bain, who has studied effective college teaching, calls “a natural critical learning environment” (18). A lively discussion followed this question, especially since it was raised in the politically charged atmosphere of a university in Boston in the late 1960s. My professor's teaching, his advice, and his influence have stayed with me all this

time. It is surprising; I've been lucky to have had many very good teachers, but none had the same impact.

Toward the end of my first year, my professor invited the class to his house to listen to a recording of a play we had read, John Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. In opening his home to us and allowing for more informal conversation, he shared his life and interests with us. I brought my best friend with me that night, and as we walked home through the soft air of a mild May evening, I felt intellectually stimulated and satisfied and saw a life for myself doing what he did. Any mild night in May will bring back that night and the life I saw then which I now have. I think that even if I had not become a professor, his willingness to share some of his life with us would have had a major impact on me because it conveyed his respect for and interest in us as people, as well as a kind of deep level of commitment to students and teaching.

So, a number of the things that happened in my first year experience with my professor shed light on the nature of teaching excellence. He had quite a lot to teach me because he was smart. He was someone I could learn from because he really cared about his students and their success, demonstrating this by challenging us to excel and by giving us a glimpse of his personal life. His willingness to see me individually, as suggested in research on the first-year experience by John Gardner, is perhaps the biggest single thing he did that made a difference to my success as a student and, later, as a teacher. He created the natural and critical learning environment that Bain says is one of the keys to classroom excellence. Given all these features of my professor's teaching, just in my first year, it is no wonder that he had this amazing impact on me.

### *My Second Year*

When I returned to school for my sophomore year, I was in a state of some doubt about my major and possible career choices. Most of the time, I thought I wanted to write and the

only way I could think of to get there was to major in English. However, in the summer, I had worked in a department store, and though I was a minimum wage clerk, the manager had given me a number of opportunities to learn about retailing as a profession. She was bright, energetic and trusting of my eighteen-year-old skills and abilities. It was interesting, fun, challenging work, very different from what was happening to me in college. I got as far as walking down a long hall from the arts and sciences offices to the business school just to see what was there. But my professor soon wooed me back to English.

One way he did this was by opening the survey of British literature I took with him as a college sophomore by singing a bit of *Beowulf* to us. The music carried that epic like all the ancient epics, and he wanted us to have a sense of how it sounded. This episode came to mind as I began to think about opening my own course in the history of English and its contemporary forms with music, especially country music, which uses instruments and sounds drawn by Appalachian musicians from their Scots-Irish and Welsh forebears. My professor sowed the seed of this idea; from thirty years ago, the value of a multimedia approach that our contemporary techies think they invented stayed with me.

In addition, though, it was clear to me that my professor was really smart. I learned later that he had done his undergraduate degree at Haverford College in Pennsylvania; when I studied with him, he was trying hard to finish a Ph.D. in English at Princeton. Much later, he went on to get a law degree at the University of Chicago. So, he was and is plenty smart. He knew a lot about English literature and also, especially, about the history of England that bears on the literature. To make sure we learned that history, he assigned us in the sophomore survey of English literature Trevelyan's *History of England*, three incredibly dry volumes; this assignment was clearly a dud. In my recent conversation with him, long after my undergraduate experience, he wondered what he thought we'd get from it. I have no idea, since I routinely fell asleep reading Trevelyan and usually failed the little quizzes he often gave to

make sure we were doing the reading. One particularly painful episode entailed a section of the reading on the Enclosure Act in England; I know it was important but still have no idea what it was or why. It seems likely that he saw the need for us to understand the broader historical context in which the literature was produced, the kind of contextualization he was concerned with in his dissertation research on illuminations in medieval manuscripts. As with my reading of Lawrence, he showed me a way of thinking about interesting issues in a broad intellectual context.

At the end of the survey course, my instructor gave what stands in my mind as one of the all-time best lectures. He talked about the idea of literature as an attempt to restore a lost paradise. He traced this theme through all that we had studied, including Milton's *Paradise Lost*, but also in many of the other works we had read. His idea was that there were unifying themes that play out across various literary works. I've stolen this idea repeatedly: in the history of English, the key points are that language change is a natural, healthy, inevitable, unstoppable process, and that language variation is common to all languages and must be understood but cannot be judged, at least not linguistically. I mention these points at intervals through the whole course, but at the end, I tie the final lecture to these unifying ideas, following the model of my professor's last session of the British survey course.

My professor looked after some of my emotional needs too, treating me with the kind of basic decency that conveys a respect for students. So, toward the end of the first semester of sophomore year, I developed a pretty bad case of mononucleosis, the scourge of college students. I did not have complications, but I had a lot of trouble staying awake for long during four or five weeks and just could not see how to finish the work of the term. I was more focused than I had been in my first year, when I had nearly flunked out, but I was having difficulty getting all my work done and meeting deadlines. He suggested I take an incomplete in at least one course so that I could finish the required work after the holiday break, an act of simple

decency. I took the incomplete in another course (not the one I was in with him—probably it entailed a larger amount of work or a paper or something I just couldn't finish) and finished the work and the illness during the holiday break.

Research on student experience suggests that neither I nor my professor was typical of college students then or now. Writing in *My Freshman Year: What Professor Learned by Becoming a Student*, Rebekah Nathan (aka anthropologist Cathy Small of Northern Arizona University) reports that student-faculty contact plays a very small role in the life of typical undergraduates at a large university. Small's observation draws partly on her personal experience as she became a first-year student at her own institution and studied it as a distinct culture. In addition, however, Small draws on survey research with 30,000 students done by the Higher Education Research Institute. She notes that:

There is no doubt that special professors do make a difference in the life of specific students, but overall, I'd suggest, student-teacher relationships play a relatively minor role in the experience of undergraduate life in a large university. (Nathan 140)

So my experience was not typical, but it did have a big impact on me at the time and in my years in academia.

The second year experiences, then, show that the substance of what happens in a course and in the classroom has a substantial impact on excellence in teaching. My professor was clearly a smart guy, but it was more than that. Some smart people are lousy teachers because they don't really care about students. My professor's preparation and thinking about how to present the literature in the survey course was focused on providing the historical context of the works we read. In my own course on the history of English, I have tried to follow this model, setting out for students the political, military, economic and social developments that provide the backdrop for changes in the language. His work entailed a deep respect for students as well as particular attention to my individual needs;

these features, along with his high level of content expectation made for great teaching.

### *My Third and Fourth Years*

In my third and fourth years, I started to really pursue my interest in modern literature with courses in modern American novels, and modern British literature. I was happily reading Hemingway, Faulkner, Joyce, Lawrence, Woolf and others. On my professor's advice, I was taking courses in religion, philosophy, political science and other areas to get the broad background to understand the literature. I also took courses with him, both junior and senior years, one a small class, and the other a seminar on medieval literature, his area of expertise. Though I was interested in modern literature, I also knew good teaching. I was following another aspect of his advice to take courses with good people and not worry about what I studied. When I entered my senior year, I had a clear plan to attend graduate school in English, and talked a lot with him about where I might go. I wanted a place that had a flexible program where I could continue the broad-based interdisciplinary approach I had used with his guidance as an undergraduate. I needed to go elsewhere, preferably outside the northeast, to broaden my perspective and learn from different teachers. Besides, there was no point in staying at my undergraduate school as he was leaving himself.

And yet, his influence was by the end of my senior year well entrenched in my ways of thinking and reading. He had told us, for example, perhaps in the course in medieval literature called Medieval and Renaissance Epic and Romance, his area of research, that early readers had a special way of marking texts to indicate important passages. Early readers drew a small picture of a hand pointing to the key part of a text. Every book I've read since then has many little hands showing me the important bits; he's been with me in all my reading for all these years.

I learned, but not till near graduation, that he thought I was a really good student, though my grades did not reflect this fact, hovering as they did in the B range. There were only a few tantalizing indications of his assessment, while he kept raising the bar for me. I remember a conversation, after that summer job in retailing that was fun and challenging, in which he conceded that, after all, there were “other things for smart people to do with their brains than teach.” By implication, I understood that he thought I was a smart person. Why, then, did he not give me those As I so wanted and worked hard to try to earn? The answer was revealed in the letter he wrote recommending me for graduate school. The secretary in the English Department who typed the letter secretly gave me a copy around the end of my senior year. I don’t think I still have it, but I know what it said. He wrote that he was responsible for many of the Bs on my record and that he hadn’t given me As because I didn’t deserve them, but because he thought I would not be motivated to work as hard. Perhaps it was flawed psychology, but when I saw that letter at the end of my undergraduate career, I had certainly learned to work effectively in my courses and developed some key habits that have served me well for my whole professional life. And, when I re-connected with him recently, I wrote by email that I was not at all sure he would remember me; his response was that of course he remembered his best students.

After I graduated and before I left for graduate school, he took me out to lunch. We went down to the waterfront, looking for a particular place he had been to once before. It was a rich pleasure to spend one of my last days as a student with him, and then as now, he talked to me about teaching. He might well have asked me then as he did most recently: Who are your students? What do you think they are getting from your class? What do you think THEY think they are getting from your class? He clearly finds teaching richly satisfying; he managed to convey that in what and how he taught, then and now. That day on the docks is carefully filed away in my mem-

ory as the culmination of my experience as his student, focused around a conversation about teaching and learning.

There were, of course, some less than wonderful aspects of my experience with this teacher. He did not push hard enough some ideas that would have sent me in a more useful direction: try linguistics, he said. I didn't, though it turns out I was much better suited to it than literary analysis. Had he pushed me to get more math, I might even have gone into science, which I liked. Dispositionally, I would have had a better fit in science. As it was, in graduate school when I was required to take linguistics by virtue of my teaching assistantship assignment, I took to it quickly and easily. I think he missed the mismatch between my natural talents and personality and my choice to follow in his footsteps. I did end up teaching, but in language and linguistics rather than in literature.

Other aspects of his advice were not perfect either. In one instance, he recommended a teacher for Shakespeare who was not good. When I told him what the guy said in class, he pointed out that he knew him only as a colleague and could not know except from my inside information what went on in his classroom. The classes, as I recall, consisted largely of the instructor reading parts of the various plays aloud and presenting critics' comments on them. In addition, the teacher was rather arrogant, and said that if any of us wanted to see him, we'd have to catch him when he was "around," and certainly not during any regularly scheduled office hours.

So it wasn't a perfect experience. But I did learn a lot about teaching, and I am certain I am a better teacher from having had this teacher in my past. He stayed on target all the time, even in those difficult days in the late 60s with the Vietnam War, assassinations, the Kent State shootings and various other national and international political and social developments. Whatever his concerns with those larger issues and whatever his politics (I never knew, really, what he believed or cared about), his focus was on teaching us to read, write, and think critically about the issues that mattered.

A few years ago, I sought him out prior to my President's

Colloquium presentation at Oakland. These days, you can find anyone on the Internet if you really want to, and it wasn't really hard to find him. I knew he was in Chicago, and that he was a lawyer, and so just putting in his name brought up his practice and current teaching information, along with an email address. Of course he had exactly the right answer and, ever the teacher, references to books and other sources to support a point I wanted to make in my talk. Not long after the talk, I attended a conference in Chicago and arranged to see him for lunch.

Despite hours in class and years after my classes of meditating on my experience of his teaching, I still find his talent somewhat mysterious. The mystery, of course, is part of the appeal, that is, that I cannot figure it out. Parker Palmer gives some additional insight when he says what makes great teachers great is who they are as people. Palmer writes: "This book builds on a simple premise: *good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher*" (10). My professor had a clear sense of his own identity and a high level of personal integrity. And yet, even this does not fully explain his talent as a teacher.

### ***Four Years, Five Semesters, One Mystery***

My professor met all the criteria described by Palmer, Bain and others who have studied teaching excellence in college. From the first individual conversation I had with him about *Sons and Lovers*, to our collegial conversation over lunch thirty years later, his teaching has remained in my mind as a model. From him I learned how to have something to teach by thinking broadly about key ideas in my field and the context in which they have developed. I also learned how to engage students, following his models of pickles and singing, by bringing to class music and videos, newspaper clippings and websites as well as the findings of my own on-going research on the issues in linguistics and literacy that I study. Like him, I try to be

someone from whom students can learn, by being available for individual help, by being fair and open about grading and by giving students the benefit of the doubt when they are overburdened by obligations of work, school, families and outside interests. I never think I am quite good enough, of course, or at least not as good as he was and is in the classroom. Perhaps Parker Palmer is right that good teaching cannot be reduced to specific identifiable elements and certainly not to attire, because it has more to do with who the teacher is as a person. And perhaps I was just plain lucky to have this gifted teacher mark the path to teaching excellence for me.

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