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Serious Play

Paul Strong
Alfred University

At the memorial service for his nephew last summer, Senator Ted Kennedy read a poem, the same one the Irish Ambassador recited shortly after John F. Kennedy Jr. was born:

We wish to the new child,
A heart that can be beguiled,
By a flower,
That the wind lifts,
And it passes.
If the storm breaks for him,
May the trees shake for him,
Their blossoms down.

In the night that he is troubled,
May a friend wake for him,
So that his time be doubled,
And at the end of all loving and love
May the Man above,
Give him a crown.

Reading those words I was reminded of how it is we turn to poetry at the most profound moments at our of our lives, births, weddings, and deaths, when we wish to express "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

Among the arts, perhaps only music shares the power to console; moreover, the times we wish for such succor are usually not nearly as dramatic as an untimely death. A simple example: when, by the luck of the draw, I have a collection of students who refuse to meet me halfway and engage in the work most classes do willingly and with pleasure, my thoughts turn to the matador Pedro Romero in *The Sun Also Rises* who gets a bull which does not see well. Such a bull makes it impossible to do one's best work, for such a bull cannot respond properly to the cape. Nonetheless, Hemingway's bullfighter, a professional, does the best he can with what he has; so, smiling inwardly as I am reminded of him, I think "OLE!" and do my best with a class that sees less clearly than one might wish.

At my first job, trying to teach art history and literature at an engineering school where many students and faculty did not value the liberal arts, I often found myself

pondering something I had been told: two years after graduating, engineers wish their courses had taught more of the applied math and science they need on the job. In ten years they wish they'd learned more basic math and science. Twenty years out, they wish they'd spent more time studying literature, music, and art.

I assume this is because as we grow older and begin to see things *sub specie aeternitatis*, we come to better understand what really matters. At the top of my writing syllabus is Annie Dillard's dictum: "Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What could you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality?" Students don't much like hearing that, and they like it even less when I remind them that when class is over they are 50 minutes closer to dying. They'd better be paying attention; or, if a class isn't worth 50 minutes of their lives, they'd better find one that is.

Sometimes this leads to a discussion of "famous last words." On his deathbed in a cheap hotel, Oscar Wilde is supposed to have looked around and said, "Either this wallpaper goes or I do." Civil War General John Sedgwick, at the battle of Spotsylvania Court House, remarked, "Why, they couldn't hit an elephant at this dist--" There's Hamlet's "The rest is silence" and Gus McCall's "Woodrow, quite a party." On his deathbed Brendan Behan turned to the nun who had just wiped his brow and said, "Ah, bless you Sister, may all your sons be bishops." And, of course, there is Charles Foster Kane's "Rosebud," a true deathbed perspective on what matters and what doesn't. But there is another class of less familiar last words, those never heard because they've never been uttered anywhere, on anyone's deathbed, and first among them must be the following: "I wish I had spent more time at the office." I assume this is what those engineers come to realize when they hit middle age.

I fear for 18 year olds who come to college wanting to be investment bankers, having swallowed the American dream, hook, line and sinker, fully expecting that making a bundle is the fast track to happiness, students who have never read *An American Tragedy* or *The Great Gatsby* or *Walden*, or *Death of a Salesman*, or seen *Citizen Kane*. It's not my point that these novels or films would move them away from investment banking, nor do I think most of us teach these books with that intent. But until a young man or woman realizes there is something uniquely at work here—one never hears, for example, of the Bulgarian Dream—it may not occur to them to step back and examine it as an "assumption" rather than as a "truth." The unexamined life may or may not be worth living, but an illiberal education most probably means that we live less than freely, enslaved by unexamined assumptions and prejudices. Had more students the chance to dispassionately examine their assumptions, there might be fewer middle-aged men and women waking up wondering, "What right did that 18 year old have to decide I was going to become an investment banker?" If they had read Thoreau as undergrads, they would have had the chance to at least consider his dictum that "superfluous wealth can buy superfluities only" and not possibly have it come as a shock twenty five years later. Must we be condemned to lives of quiet desperation, as Thoreau felt our forbears in Concord were? Reading *Walden* will not prevent it, of course -- many have read it and not learned its lessons—but not reading it makes the trap of repeating the past all the more likely.

Some years ago my wife and I bumped into some other Americans in the Sistine Chapel. Turned out they didn't have the foggiest notion of what all that stuff was on the ceiling. So, ever the teacher, I gave them the explanations: the story goes that Bramante, the architect, and Raphael, the painter, were so envious of Michelangelo that they encouraged Pope Julius II to force this peerless sculptor, but novice painter, to cover the enormous empty space of the Sistine ceiling with frescoes in order to sidetrack his career; that Michelangelo, who wanted to sculpt, not paint, tried to talk his way out of it; that when it was half done and the work in progress was shown, its impact was so great that Bramante, more jealous than ever, implored the Pope to take Michelangelo off the job rather than allow him to finish this masterpiece; that it took Michelangelo three years to paint more than 10,000 square feet, and in his hurry to finish so he could get back to sculpting, he sometimes painted in the darkness with a candle strapped to his forehead so he could see what he was doing.

After my mini-lecture we had a chat. In what part of Rome were they staying? They weren't sure. What were their plans for the rest of their stay? They had none. Did they know any Italian? Nope. We spoke of the Forum, Hadrian's Villa and the Tivoli Gardens, the Pantheon and the Piazza Navona; it was news to them. They didn't know about Giolitti's, that wonderful ice cream parlor. They might as well have been visiting the dark side of the moon. These people were obviously well off. They'd made a lot of money somehow, but seemed vaguely bored and a bit disoriented, and as I stood there in the Sistine Chapel, in the middle of the Vatican, a temple of the arts, I felt profoundly sad.

My love for Italy and things Italian goes back to my undergraduate days studying art history. I've never understood why I am so drawn to painting, but it is a central fact of my life. My first visit to Italy—to the Sistine Chapel, Botticelli and Bronzino in the Uffizi, Giotto's frescoes in Padua and the mosaics in St. Marks and Ravenna—was incredibly exciting. Whenever I am in the presence of such beauty I think of Walter Pater -- "In this short day of frost and sun . . . art comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moment's sake."

Traveling in Italy has brought me many moments of "the highest quality" and, more, given me a passion for things Italian, among them Frances Mayes books, *Under the Tuscan Sun* and *Bella Tuscany*, which concern her attempt to begin a new life after an ugly divorce. If her books have a subplot, aside from a celebration of Italian wine and food -- the difference between crostini and bruschette, for example -- it is to articulate the richness and beauty and fullness of Italian life. *In Bella Tuscany* she writes, "Italians claim more time for their lives . . . At home in California, time often feels like a hula-hoop, a ceaseless whirl on a body fixed but in a rocking place. I could kiss the ground here, not to feel myself in that tight space where the past gnaws the future but in the luxuriant freedom of a long day to walk out for a basket of plums under the great wheel of the Mediterranean sun" (250). Again, along these same lines: "I feel as well a growing distrust of spending too much of one's life deifying work. Finding that running balance among ambition, solitude, stimulation, adventure—how to do this? I heard Ramsey Clark, then Attorney General, speak when I was in college. All I remember him saying was something like, 'When I die, I want to be so exhausted that you can throw me on the scrap heap.' He wanted to be totally consumed by his life" (100).

Does this not ring true to us work-obsessed Americans? Mayes' words are a cautionary reminder, another version of those wonderful *carpe diem* lines,

Time will not be ours forever;
He at length our good will sever.
Spend not then his gifts in vain.
Suns that set may rise again;
But if once we lose this light,
'Tis with us perpetual night.

More prosaically, there are John Wayne's thoughts on the subject. When working on his last film, "The Shootist," Wayne was dying of cancer, and he knew it. One morning someone on the set said, "Boy, it's a beautiful day." To which Wayne replied, "Every day you wake up is a beautiful day."

To those in the teaching biz, these sentiments are old news. But to a college freshman they may well be a breaking headline. Poetry, said Ezra Pound, is news which stays news. But how can we communicate to our students, some of whom may never have worked a day in their lives, the downside of "spending too much of one's life deifying work." How can we help them find "that running balance among ambition, solitude, stimulation, adventure."

One way, I believe, is to broaden their view of which things are worthy of study in college, and not privilege and deify courses in their "major," that is, courses which may lead to a profession. The bane of too many undergraduates' lives is the time they spend worrying about their major, which is often just another way of worrying about a career. Calling it a "major" makes it sound all important and implies everything else is secondary, a "minor" or an "elective." And what are those electives? All too often they're the courses in poetry and music and film and novels and painting that give so much pleasure. Why shouldn't college be a time to focus on serious play, on those things that amateurs, that is, lovers of learning, do for pleasure when they grow up? What would happen if an Honors Program made such courses the basis of its curriculum? In fact, I have tried to get away with this at my school, and I can tell you what, given the opportunity, some people choose to do in this situation.

Each fall and spring, when I send out the call for Honors seminars, faculty are asked to propose a course they feel passionately about, to experiment, to try something new. It goes without saying that this gives a freshness to many of the offerings and a degree of commitment one simply would not expect from someone teaching the same old, same old. When faculty are asked to offer seminars on anything they like, on topics totally unrelated to their "specialty" not to mention their "field," not surprisingly they choose to explore the very things adults do when they are free to do as they like. "Reading courses" of all sorts are most popular; the second largest category of seminars, which would have pleased Thoreau mightily, might be called "things of the spirit": an anthropologist on alternative healing, a specialist in religion on spirituality and the counterculture, a drama teacher on T'ai Chi, a psychologist on Zen, a sociologist on religion and para-religion, and an English teacher on the art of meditation. A few years back a political scientist offered

a seminar entitled "Vision Quest" which involved building a sweat lodge, fasting, and prayer. Another category of seminars which are serious fun deal with the arts: writing and producing a musical, building a lap dulcimer and learning to play it, studying the blues, or opera. There have been many courses on film—film noir, the detective film, Humphrey Bogart and Stanley Kubrick. Of course there is a more "normal" selection of such things as Chaos Theory, Superconductivity, Sleep and Dreams, Knots and Surfaces, The Left Side of the Brain, Plato and Einstein, but there's also Food as Cultural Metaphor. Is that too far over the top? Some on my campus think so—whatever happened to intensive calculus? But why shouldn't students learn something about cooking in college -- and I don't mean on their own, in the privacy of their own kitchens. My wife took great pleasure trying to recreate that wonderful pasta with gorgonzola and pistachios we loved in Venice. Why not share this secret?

I think the same approach makes sense for the senior thesis, that staple of Honors Programs, usually involving research, often a more intensive version of work done in the classroom or in the lab. Most students know that's normative, and that's what most choose. But just as faculty can be encouraged to teach to their non professional interests, students can be encouraged to follow their heart, which is often in a field far from their major. And to my way of thinking the most satisfying senior projects, the ones in which students are most invested and which achieve the most striking results, are this sort of labor of love. What else would one expect from an entomologist who spent untold hours of her senior year attempting, by trial and error, to recreate her grandmother's recipes and to construct a cookbook of them? Or the artist who made a book of her father's poetry—handset, hand bound, with her own graphics? Or the English major who spent over \$700 on material and much more of her senior year than she probably should have researching and then creating a dress and undergarments for Shakespeare's Viola? Or the pre-med who wrote a jazz piece and talked the jazz ensemble into a public performance? These are the things that we, adults, might do if free to do what we wish. As educators, I believe, we owe it to our students to validate these pursuits as worthy of their time at the University.

Some years ago when my English Department was writing a description of itself, of what we did and what we stood for, someone suggested the old saw, "There's no money in poetry, but there's no poetry in money, either." Our discussion reminded me of the three bears. Papa bear thought it too defensive; Mama bear thought it too in your face. Baby bear, me, thought it was just right. Why not say to the more or less unformed 18 year olds who come into our grasp, some of whom believe the function of college is to enable them to become day traders, and who view their undergraduate years as a kind of apprenticeship to that end: look! work is an important part of life—teaching is, after all, a job, and I love it—but you neglect serious play at your peril.

For we know things about the long view that they don't. As much as we may love teaching, we know full well how much we value time spent away from work—in truth, for some of us that's quite a bit of time—summers not teaching, for example. But at the least there are evenings and weekends. Some day they may retire from that job they so eagerly seek. They might even opt for "early retirement." Common wisdom is that 40% of those who reach 65 can expect to live to 90. Surely our students are not thinking of how to spend those years pleasurably and

productively, but we can. What will they do in those 25 years? Watch TV? Play golf? Water the lawn?

Not if we've done our job. Not if we've introduced them to the things educated people do for pleasure. We read. We meditate. We cook. We listen to music, and we go to the movies. We travel—to the Pantheon and to Giolitti's. We learn the difference between crostini and bruschette, between Montalcino and Montepulciano. And when we are in the Sistine Chapel, or standing in the Uffizi looking at the Botticellis, we enjoy them all the more because they are not a blur of confusing images—our minds are filled with what we learned once, about Pope Julius II or Neo-Platonism. We have more to say about these beautiful objects, to our companions, to our children, and most importantly to ourselves, than “that's different.”

I began by speaking of poetry and how we call on it at the most profound moments of our lives. It seems unlikely that any of us will be in the Kennedys' place, expecting a wedding one day, preparing words for a funeral the next. That is a cruel circumstance. More likely, death will not intrude and we will not need consoling; the wedding will proceed as planned; poetry serves those times as well. I was most conscious of this last spring when my daughter asked what I was going to read at her wedding. After a lifetime of teaching poetry, and of reading it to her as a child, I had to choose words that, I hoped, would express my love for her and my hope for her future, and add beauty to the ceremony. I would like you to read now what I read then, Miller Williams' “A Poem for Emily,” my hope being nothing more than that it “comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake”:

Small fact and fingers and farthest one from me,
a hand's width and two generations away,
in this still present I am fifty-three.
You are not yet a full day.

When I am sixty-three, and you are ten,
and you are neither closer nor as far,
your arms will fill with what you know by then,
the arithmetic and love we do and are.

When I by blood and luck am eighty-six
and you are some place else and thirty-three
believing in sex and god and politics
with children who look not at all like me,

some time I know you will have read them this
so they will know I love them and say so
and love their mother. Child, whatever is
is always or never was. Long ago,

a day I watched a while beside your bed,
I wrote this down, a thing that might be kept

a while, to tell you what I would have said
when you were who knows what and I was dead
which is I stood and loved you while you slept.