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## Teaching Self: The Ambiguity of Lived Experience in Classroom Discourse

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Teaching Self:  
The Ambiguity of Lived Experience in Classroom Discourse

By  
Scott V. Gealy

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
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Major: English

Under the Supervision of Professor Robert Brooke

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Teaching Self:

The Ambiguity of Lived Experience in Classroom Discourse

Scott V. Gealy, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2013

Advisor: Robert Brooke

Inspired by Paul Heilker's notion of the essay as a form of exploration over argument, embodying an *anti-scholastic* and *chrono-logical* approach, and Candace Spigelman's endorsement of *experience as evidence in academic discourse*, this thesis weaves memoir into more traditional scholarship in an effort to complicate the archetype of the effective teacher. Furthermore, the essay seeks to deconstruct conventional student, teacher, and cultural binaries with the help of the theoretical work of Deborah Britzman, Parker Palmer, Mikhail Bakhtin, Joy Ritchie and David Wilson and others, while using Scott Russell Sanders' narrative essay "Under the Influence" as a mentor text for reconciling the complexities of addiction and recovery with my professional identity as a high school teacher. Through this *chrono-logical* exploration, I illuminate the classroom as a microcosm of the complexity of lived experience in order to remind the reader that standardized and reductionist notions of pedagogy threaten the most important variable in education: the human being.

Teaching is simultaneously the most selfless and selfish profession I can think of. Every day I am directly accountable to nearly one hundred fifty students, as they watch, respond, react, roll their eyes, attempt to interrupt, or let their minds and their quiet conversations wander. Five times a day I have the spotlight, as thirty students await my instruction. And every day I invite my students to feel that my classroom is *me*, and it is *their* classroom.

Teaching for me is a multi-dimensional experience, as I lead my students through an improvisational dance choreographed by the simultaneous forecasting of where our curricular progress needs to be and evaluating where it actually is, drawing on memories and trying to capture the right phrase to finish an anecdote that may help move students toward understanding or empathy, making notes on the board and drifting across the room to refocus a distracted student or nudge those on the margins into the discussion—listening, responding, asking, reaching out, pushing forward, stepping back, changing direction, and letting go. For me, teaching is digging deeply within myself in order that I might, just for a minute, be outside myself to fully engage in the moment.

I've begun to think of these classroom paradoxes as a microcosm of a life well lived. Every day I give myself away so that I might have more of myself to share, and every day I open my heart to the students who may feel they do not have a voice, so that I might better understand what it means to speak. I am a good teacher because I am so much more, but so much of who I am I will never share with my students. Though the shadows of my past may haunt me at times, even on occasion lead me to question my legitimacy as a leader, I know that they are an essential part of the teacher and the person I am.

In his narrative essay, “Under the Influence,” Scott Russell Sanders’ masterfully captures the paradox of control at the core of addiction. His essay is fascinating in its ability to both salvage and complicate meaning from the haunting legacy of a childhood lived with an alcoholic father. What I find most penetrating, however, is not the myriad stories the speaker shares of fear and abuse and violence and denial, but Sanders’ portrayal of the cunning nature of alcoholism and the way it so deftly defies attempts at understanding, avoidance, or control. The longer I stay sober and the longer I teach, the more I realize that this is true not just for addiction, but for life; it is never so simple as we would like to make it, and we never have as much control as we would like to believe.

The paradox that surfaces through the stories in “Under the Influence” deconstructs conventional understanding of self-actualization. The speaker’s determination to break free from the tyranny of his father’s behavior has actually resulted in his own enslavement. The harder he tries to avoid his father’s fate—vowing never to drink, plunging himself into the quest for professional success and personal stability—the more he deepens his own fears and addictions: his overwhelming drive to succeed, his fear of disappointing others, his avoidance of confrontation, his hypersensitivity to the emotions that surround him. The shame he’s carried since childhood still thrives deep inside, no matter how hard he tries to outlive it. Though it was his father who nearly destroyed their family through years of drinking, abuse, and erratic behavior, it is the adult Sanders who carries the shame. More than thirty years removed from childhood, he confesses, “In certain moods I blame myself for everything. Guilt burns like acid in my

veins” (744). The harder he pushes to escape his demons, the more he ensures their survival.

Just two paragraphs from the end, after more than eleven pages examining his father’s alcoholism from seemingly every possible angle, the speaker’s tone shifts. Instead of neatly packaged resolution, he does something more revealing and far more human; he concedes his own powerlessness. After so much focus on his past, Sanders now grounds us fully in his present, telling us for the first time *why* he is writing the essay. The inference the reader makes through much of the piece—that he must exorcise yesterday’s demons in order to come to terms with his life today—suddenly seems simplistic, as he leads the reader to the core of his fear, that the legacy of alcoholism far outlives the drinker.

I am moved to write these pages now because my own son, at the age of ten, is taking on himself the griefs of the world, and in particular the griefs of his father. He tells me that when I am gripped by sadness he feels responsible; he feels there must be something he can do to spring me from depression, to fix my life. And that crushing sense of responsibility is exactly what I felt at the age of ten in the face of my father’s drinking. My son wonders if I, too, am possessed (ibid).

It is not until this point that we finally see the dark truth that has been there all along. The cycle of disease repeats itself. Despite the father’s best efforts to spare the son, he passes the burden of fear and shame to him, leaving the boy prone to repeat the cycle, to seek escape from oppressive feelings of isolation, fear, and obligation. Alcoholism is ugly, Sanders tells us, but most troubling is its unwillingness to die with the alcoholic. It is passed down through generations like a parasite, from the blood of the father to the blood

of the son, lurking, quietly devouring and patiently waiting to be passed along. “I write, therefore, to drag into the light what eats at me—the fear, the guilt, the shame—so that my own children may be spared” (ibid).

When I finished “Under the Influence” for the first time, I sat in silence, gazing at my still reflection in the dark window across the room. *(T)o drag into the light what eats me.* I was shaken. But I didn’t grow up in the home of an alcoholic. My father hardly drank enough for me to notice, and I don’t think my mom ever drank at all when I was a kid. I faced no abuse; I was raised in the loving, safe, and supportive home of middle-class parents, wholly dedicated to giving their children the best life possible. But Sanders’ piece resonated far more deeply with me, in a language that flows in veins, echoes in self-conscious remarks, and extends as far as any memory I have. Whether I realized it or not, alcoholism has been present in my life since my earliest memories.

I began my career as a high school English teacher and theatre director at 29, two years after once again returning to the town where I grew up. Since high school, I’d rarely stayed in one place. I went to college in Colorado for a while, spent a few months in Alaska earning money on commercial fishing boats, and another few down in Portland spending it. I did labor and carpentry work in Taos, New Mexico for a year, came back to finish my undergrad in English and theatre at Nebraska Wesleyan, then left again to spend two years working in film and television production in New York City. Back in Lincoln once more, I decided to complete my teaching certification in hopes of settling into something a little more permanent.

Since taking a teaching job, I haven't spoken to many people about my past, at least not in professional circles. I have a personal story, and I have a professional identity. I know that my personal story contributes immeasurably to my professional identity, though I have not mentioned much of it to any of the hundreds of students I have worked with during my more than seven years of teaching high school. On very few occasions have I alluded to this past to colleagues, and only then after repeatedly declining offers of a beer in social settings or invitations to bars on Friday afternoons. I don't believe my roles as both *recovering* and *teacher* are fundamentally at odds, nor do they make me unique. Nevertheless, I keep my past largely in the shadows, often haunted by feelings of guilt for choices I made twenty years ago. To fully realize my identity, both personally and professionally, I must reconcile these elements of my story and accept my whole self, regardless of who the cultural narrative suggests a teacher is supposed to be.

I bring both my personal history and my professional identity to school each day, and more than any strategies or lessons, I believe that is why I am the teacher that I am. In *Teacher Narrative as Critical Inquiry*, Joy Ritchie and David Wilson contend that a teacher's capacity to reflect on the multi-faceted narrative of his or her life is essential for thoughtful pedagogical practice and progressive education.

The interplay of multiple and often conflicting narratives of professional and personal history...can provide the catalyst for reflection, critique, and 're-vision' that initiates and sustains teachers' capacity to resist confining cultural narratives and to write new narratives of teaching and living, thus recomposing themselves as teachers and as individuals (76).



It is this sentiment that spurs me to be mindful of the years I spent seeking escape, pushing personal and questioning cultural boundaries. Doubtless this sparks an unspoken connection with many of my students who struggle to find their place, to relate to their peers or their elders, or to discover anything that they deem meaningful within the institution of school. Of primary concern here, however, is that my addictions and the behaviors that surrounded them were driven by a foreboding sense of uncertainty, coupled with an earnest desire to engage with something that felt meaningful and authentic. The truth is, that drug- and alcohol-fueled self-destruction was my early attempt to deal with the uncertainties that we all must face every day.

Florida Scott-Maxwell writes that, “You need only claim the events of your life to make yourself yours. When you truly possess all you have been and done...you are fierce with reality” (qtd in Palmer 29). It is this ferocity of spirit that I believe resonates so deeply with students. I approach each day with as much urgency and self-awareness as I can muster. Buddhist nun and scholar Pema Chodron describes the role of the teacher as built on openness and trust. Teaching is an act of plunging into uncertainty with a sincere desire “to engage with others from a place of curiosity and caring and in that way contact their innate decency and wisdom” (66). Realizing my identity means embracing the totality of my life, while surrendering to ever-lingering fear and uncertainty by plunging ferociously into the unknown of the classroom and dealing humbly with each human being I encounter, is the act of claiming all of myself in order to be the best teacher I can be.

While seeking each day to claim the wholeness of my true self, I also honor the wholeness of each student who enters my classroom. A student responds most of all, not

to curriculum or lessons, nor to the gadgets we use to deliver those things, but to a person whom they know cares and respects them as a human being. “What might it take to humanize schools so that they become more hospitable to the lives, interests, backgrounds, and aspirations of young people?” asks Heather Bruce in “Subversive Acts of Revision: Writing and Justice.” We must challenge the status quo by “put(ing) relationships at the center of everything in schools,” and by eliminating the inherently “violent” and “life-sucking” focus on grades, test scores, and rankings (31). The fear-based culture of high-stakes standardized testing and achievement reduces students to numbers and denies their intrinsic value, but if that culture is an inescapable reality of our current system of education, I can do my part to humanize the classroom each day for those one hundred fifty students and to create a healing community that honors the complexities at the root of the human experience.

For four years I taught three or four English classes and two or three intro- and advanced-theatre classes in what we called the black box. Technically referred to as a “lab theatre,” it had ceilings twenty feet high and was roughly fifty feet by fifty feet, its walls, shelves, and ceiling all painted flat black. A bank of three levels of mobile risers covered two-thirds of the floor space, semi-permanently set up to accommodate tables and chairs for 38 students during the school day or seating for nearly a hundred for small theatrical performances. The levels descending from the back wall to the teacher’s desk and lectern made it resemble a small lecture hall at a university, though its energy and atmosphere were distinctly high school.

As I prepare one August morning for a new crop of theatre students, I am quickly reminded of just how loud the risers are. Any chair slid in or out creates a thundering echo, and as students begin to flow through the doors in groups of three and four, more chairs are being pulled out, bumped, and jostled. Backpacks drop from shoulders or tables with resonant booms, while the volume of the voices steadily increases to compensate for the ambient roar of the cavernous classroom as students continue to stream in.

Though I've been teaching the intro class now for ten consecutive semesters, in many ways I'm still making it up as I go. Teaching in this atmosphere is improvisational art. I know where we are and where we are aimed—that day, that week, and over the course of the semester—but how I get there has never been the same for two semesters in a row. I build the class around the concept of community, working hard to invite students to feel comfortable enough to take creative risks among more than thirty of their peers from nearly as many backgrounds. Diversity is inevitable in this type of elective arts class in a public school setting. There are eager freshmen who have grown up involved with community theatre of various kinds and can't wait for the opportunity to demonstrate their stage presence; there are sophomores and juniors who don't appear thrilled about the prospect of performance, but who had me as an English teacher in years past and enjoyed the experience enough to take a chance and be back in my classroom; there are students who clearly have no interest in being here and make it apparent that they won't put forth any more effort than is absolutely necessary.

One young man, whom I had two years before as a freshman, came in the first day and, in his well crafted proto-slacker shtick, wandered up to my desk to get the lay of the

land. “Hey, yo, Mista’ G. How’s it goin’?” He puts two fingers of his left hand to his forehead, in a sort of mock salute.

“Yeah, well, like I dug havin’ you in English last year and all that, even with all the readin’s and the writin’s you wanted us to be doin’, and you know how much all that stuff just makes me tired...” he trails off with a kind of hearty guffaw to see if I’ll bite, then resumes. “Yeah, but I was wonderin’, like, since this is a theatre class and all that, am I gonna have to do homework?”

“Mornin’, Scott. Well, there will be homework, but probably not quite as much as in your English class.” I’m attempting to give him the courtesy of occasional eye contact, while busying myself retrieving handouts and getting materials prepared.

“That sounds good, Mista’ G. Well, you know me, I’m not much of a theatre buff, but I thought it might be worth a shot, you know, what with gettin’ to hang with you every day.” The sarcasm is there, but he’s sincere too.

“Hey, thanks buddy. I’m lookin’ forward to hangin’ with you too. But you can’t get off the hook so easy with the homework thing.” I give him a wry and knowing smile.

“Awe shucks, Mista’ G. Well, we’ll just have to see I guess.” Apparently satisfied, he turns and walks toward a chair in the back when, suddenly he stops and turns to me. “Oh yeah, Mista’ G, one more thing. Can I listen to my headphones while you’re up there goin’ through your little spiels and all that? You know how I do love my music.” He tilts his head back and gives an exaggerated nod to indicate this little “understanding” we share.

“I *do* know, Scott, and you know you’re a man after my own heart. But you see, you have to respect me and your peers enough to stay present in our discussions. How

about this; if you agree not to listen to your music while I'm giving my "spiels", then I'll let you listen to your headphones when you're working by yourself on projects."

He appears to be weighing his options. "Yeah, that sounds good, Mista' G," then a slight pause. "Can I listen to my tunes *now*?"

"No Scott. We're about to get started. Go have a seat." I'm a little more assertive now, and he appears to know a line has been drawn."

"Sure thing, Mista' G." He winks and gives me the thumbs-up.

As Scott turns and ambles up the risers toward a seat as close to the back as he can find, I finish getting materials ready for class, smile, and shake my head. *Here we go again*, I think.

Occasionally, in the right company—usually old friends or those whom I know have a history of partying—I will toss out some of those old stories, the "me" that I used to be. And if I start, I can get on a role, recounting the mad antics, sometimes even feeling the glint in my eye and the devilish grin conjured by the echoes of a wild youth. But the stories leave me feeling cheap and dirty. Like the grin, sort of a conditioned response, I suppose, because the humorous and carefree stories lead to the memories I don't share with old friends or the close and inquisitive, the less carefree stories, the ones that are painful, or just embarrassing.

The autumn I turned twenty-three in Portland, Oregon, so recently flush with cash from a summer spent commercial fishing in Alaska, I was quickly broke and maxed out on credit cards. I worked a three-to-eleven retail shift for a couple months, but either

showed up late smelling like booze or called in sick enough times that I couldn't keep it. I'd moved down in late September to live with a close friend, a plan we'd had in the back of our minds for a few years. We took a sixth-floor apartment downtown above a classic Greek diner and a bar called the Second Act Lounge. Though my drinking to excess had always been an issue, the hopelessness and oblivion were worse than they'd ever been.

I remember lying for hours through the late morning and early afternoon on an old love seat, listening to the drone of leaf blowers somewhere below in the distance, the TV flashing and mumbling across the room. I prayed for sleep that came only fitfully and tried to avoid a drink for as long as possible. I'd been eating and sleeping so little and drinking for so much of each day, that time spent sober left me riddled with anxiety.

I remember desperately trying to give my body a break, but feeling so overwhelmed with tension and fear that I'd rarely make it past three in the afternoon. The feeling is still vivid. It's not what's typically considered a hangover – the pounding headache of dehydration, the nausea and agony of hours spent slumped over the toilet. I'd had that when I was younger, but not much anymore. Though the physical toil of this type of chronic drinking is harsh, it's the psychological agony that is unbearable. I remember the act of breathing as one that sucked all of my energy; like the pressure on my chest is so great that it's exhausting to inhale, but if I dare take my mind off of breathing, the weight might be too much and I'll just stop. The thought shoots bolts of fear from my chest to my stomach, and it surges in waves through my body leaving a tingle in my toes, my belly, my fingers, and deep in the recesses of my ears. My heart races, thumps, and skips occasionally, and the space around me seems so vast, the world too big. If I close my eyes I'm drifting into the great abysses; the endless grey sky

outside my apartment windows threatens to swallow me. The rational orientation of my equilibrium seems off, and I'm dodging the thought that the apartment could shift, spilling me out the window to be sucked into the ether. My stomach drops with another surge of anxiety, and my hands and feet are sweating—wrapped in blankets and slimy with sweat, cold feet that don't stop rubbing together.

When I do start drinking again, my mind will calm down. Gin or vodka kept in the freezer has almost no taste and won't make you gag when you're still weak, and it will give me my breath back and settle me back into my body. But I put off the drink, push it back, because I know as soon as I start I won't stop until I'm unconscious, and the sober, frightened me has no way to control where I'll wind up, or with whom, or when I'll get there, or how. Since I was sixteen or seventeen, I've fallen out of moving vehicles (once, while I was driving) and fallen off of roofs; I've gotten robbed; I've passed out at three in the afternoon next to a gas station phone booth, when some guy kicked me and asked if I was okay, I remember saying, "Yeah, just waiting to use the phone, man..." I've been arrested, crashed cars, lost jobs, and quit school; I spent two nights in the hospital with a heat stroke and dehydration, and been through two stints in rehab, but still, not drinking is unimaginable. I can't even remember what that was like.

Three-thirty. It starts with vodka that I keep in the freezer, until I can stomach the beers. Saliva pours into my mouth and my stomach burns as the liquor makes its way down, tasteless and slightly viscous with cold. I begin to notice the knots in my neck and my back and how badly I've been grinding my teeth, as the heavy anxiety finally drifts away. Starting to feel loose, I'll pick up the pace and relish my return to sanity, because now that I start to feel like myself, start gaining confidence, I want to keep feeling more,

until finally I am alive again. I'll have three or four pulls from the bottle, then open a beer. Eventually I'll make my way downstairs for a pack of cigarettes before settling into a bar stool at the Second Act. In the three or four years before, many nights I'd find myself somewhere where there would be a joint or a bowl, or maybe I'd stumble across some coke and I'd push away sleep as long as possible, because I know that with sleep comes the inevitability of another day. So I'll just stay up drinking beers on somebody's front porch, smoking cigarette after cigarette as the complexion of the houses across the street changes from deep charcoal to grey to pale blue and the street lights go out.

Typically, I remember nothing after maybe midnight, and will hear stories from friends, or simply wake up on someone's floor, not knowing where I am, or if I drove there or if I threw up on myself or if I took something, or was it just the booze? And when I hit my head, or my jaw, or my shoulder, and on what? Or if someone poured something on me in my sleep, or more likely, I was just too wasted to wake up and find a bathroom. And I'll stumble out a front door to a sidewalk, trying to get my bearings before beginning to walk home. Three or four or five years of this - three, four, six times a week; the same nights and the same days, over and over, spiraling, burying the embarrassment, the fear and the shame, seeking shelter in numbness.

About once a week I'd make it a day or two without a drink. The panic would wane some and some self-confidence would return, at least enough for me to leave my apartment. I would go to classes, write papers and feel generally decent, but in the back of my mind I knew it was only a matter of time before I'd be back there again. I knew someone would call, and I would go out for a beer—if not tonight, probably tomorrow—and when I did, I had no control over what happened. The cliché is embarrassing now—



it seems so full of the angst of youth, selfish and dramatic—but the fact is, in my early twenties, I was sure I wouldn't live to see thirty, but that really didn't bother me. I felt shame, more than anything, for not caring more and for putting my family through the misery of my drinking. By the time I was 23, it was hard to remember when it had been any other way.

My dad dedicated himself almost completely to the success of his two children. He is a kind, intelligent, and determined man, a perfectionist who believes deeply in the American ideal, that success and happiness come to those who earn them. He and my mother came together and made it their highest priority to nurture a happy, healthy, loving family, something neither of them had experienced much of growing up. My sister and I (two years and four months my junior) were the beneficiaries of two people devoted completely to the success and happiness of their children.

As was so prevalent through the nineteen eighties, they were part of a wave of parents putting their kids squarely at the center of their universe: paying for music lessons, coaching teams, shuttling to and from campouts, dance classes, track meets and golf lessons, and hosting sleepovers. My father's decision to move the family from a small central-Nebraska town to Lincoln so he could attend law school at the University of Nebraska, meant that they were placing themselves on a trajectory toward professional and financial success that they would likely not have known had they stayed in Gothenburg, he as a music teacher and track coach and she as a nurse. This also meant that they could provide a life for us that neither of them could have imagined on the

farms in the small communities where each of them grew up. Though there were lean years when my mom's salary as a third-shift obstetric nurse was paying for law school and supporting the family, my dad made it through and landed a job with a large and prestigious Lincoln law firm. Their dream of moving, literally, from the trailer house to the affluent suburbs was beginning to take shape.

Though my sister and I spent a lot of time with baby sitters, at summer day camps, and after-school programs while both parents worked full time, there was no question of their loyalty and love for us. We knew they had to work to provide us with the opportunities and experiences that they'd never had, and though Abbi and I typically hated the various child-care scenarios, day after day, we went and were often complimented for being such thoughtful, well-behaved children.

Through elementary and junior high school I was a high achiever. I got mostly As and a few Bs and was praised as a bright and charismatic boy. I was a naturally gifted athlete who was among the stars on every team I joined, playing in all-star games and select leagues in three or four sports. I lived for sports, especially football, and for a while before about the age of twelve, my dad and I were singular in our desire for my success.

There are a number of reasons why my academics and athletics began to fall apart as I made the transition from junior-high to high school, some simple and some not so simple. Up to that point I'd become accustomed to being the best at most things I did in the classroom or on the field. Much of my academic success came with much guidance from my father, who always fancied himself a wordsmith and a grammarian, an identity he inherited from his mother. Throughout my childhood, he corrected our grammar (my sister's, mine, *and* my mother's), often encouraging us to embrace synonyms for more

commonly used words. By the time I was twelve or thirteen, I prided myself on dressing my sentences in clever vocabulary, or found I was the one who raised my hand to define words or decode acronyms that most of my classmates were not familiar with. The teachers typically rewarded me with grades that reflected my “intelligence.”

Outside of school, my experience was similar. I’d been throwing or running with a ball since not long after I could walk. I loved sports, and success in them came naturally, and was fortunate enough to have a very supportive family. By the time I was twelve, many voices were telling me that my potential was rare, and that with hard work and determination, I would excel at whatever I chose to do. It felt great to be considered *the best* and a narrative developed around me, certainly in my head, that mine would be a clear path to “success.” I was confident in my ability to achieve in school and in sports, and I had a good understanding of the formula it took to be successful in each. For me, it was not a matter of *if* I would go to college, but *where*, and if I would follow my dad’s path to law school.

It’s funny now, thinking that early success came “easily.” The hard work that my dad espoused somehow often turned out to be *his*. He did everything in his power to help me be the best I could. Alongside his determination to be the best he possibly could be as a trial lawyer, his primary mission was to help my sister and me be the best we could be. But his perfectionism often got the best of him. He wanted so badly for me to be the best at everything I did, that I often became frustrated and resentful, occasionally stifling tears or even openly sobbing while slumped over piano keys, or math homework, or dragging a club and feeling like a failure on the golf course because I couldn’t get the swing right. I remember trying every way I knew how not to cry in front of my teammates on the

baseball field as I stood on the mound, the star player on the team who, that day, could not throw strikes. I knew I was going to let everyone down.

Similar memories take me to the football field, the basketball court, the ski slope, and at one time or another, virtually anywhere else I was asked to perform. I remember how embarrassed I was when I lined up my pinewood derby car at the top of the ramp; it garnered *oohs* and *ahs* from my fellow Cub Scouts and their fathers for its sleek shape, glossy paint, and ornate decaling. Unfortunately, it was pretty clear that I had little to do with its craftsmanship. There was just no way a fifth-grader could have made such a thing. And since, perhaps, there is some justice in the universe after all, I never finished in the top three, always losing to crudely cut, partially sanded, sometimes-spray-painted cars that resembled more the woodblock of their origin than the 50s-era Indy-car design my father had stayed up most of the night to craft. I never had any doubt that my dad loved me, but by eighth-grade I was not sure I could ever be as good as I was supposed to be.

Dad often helped me with my homework in front of our IBM knock-off in the basement of our home on the south edge of Lincoln, usually the night before I had a paper due. With my doodle-strewn spiral notebook open, I would be methodically typing thoughts taken from my notes, my dad standing over my shoulder suggesting how to reword and polish the sentences I composed. More often than not, he would wind up in the computer chair and I would dictate ideas, which he would read back to me as he typed them, dressed in a diction and syntactical structure about four grade-levels above mine.

For many years this defined my understanding of good writing: it's not *what* you say but *how* you say it. Make it sound sophisticated and the reader (teacher) will respond.

I'm intrigued today to think that I didn't encounter anything in the classroom for many years to change that understanding. In fact, those times we spent together writing papers when I was between the ages of twelve and sixteen were probably the most intensive direct writing instruction I ever got. While the man could certainly be overbearing and obsessive about "doing things right," he poured everything he had into teaching me, and he seemed to do it in the best way he knew how.

On high school papers I always got As or Bs using the ability to articulate ideas that I had developed at my dad's shoulder. But by the time I was sixteen, spurred in part by the pressure I felt to succeed, and by an intense desire to be popular, I began to push boundaries in an attempt to take possession of my identity. I paid less attention in class, though I typically followed discussion well enough to slide by on my assignments and managed decent grades. After all, the narrative I'd come to embrace told me I was a good writer, a good student, and a good kid, so good things would come to me.

By the time I was a senior, however, I was entrenched in a complex web of failings, most of them my own, and I had no idea just how desperate my life would become. I was disengaged from school, and had little desire to exert myself for the sake of success. The things that inspired me were anathema to the classroom. I did just what I needed to keep adults' attention away so I could be free to have fun and seek more meaningful experience on my own time. Because my grades were good enough, however, and because my path had been laid out in front of me for many years, it seemed that I would simply continue a sequence of steps that would take me up the ladder to a university education and, eventually, some sort of professional success. It seemed that, as long as I kept going through those motions, everything would be fine. The formula for

success seemed so simple, that I could afford to veer a bit off course in the name of making the most of my life. Though partying was a widely accepted form of social expression at the time and place where I went to high school, for me there very quickly emerged a dangerously thin line between excitement and self-destruction.

One of the biggest challenges of establishing a true sense of community in the high school classroom is bringing disparate persons together in a way that fosters enough trust and respect to allow for the vulnerability necessary to progress toward common goals. If I am to have any hope of success in my classroom, I must model this vulnerability, the values I want students to aspire to, and respect for each member of the classroom community. In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer writes that, “in every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood—and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning” (10). Implicit in this approach to teaching is the vulnerability that comes from uncertainty. It’s not that there is no order in the classroom; it’s quite the opposite. There is order in the chaos of the moment as I read the room, react to the cascade of signals I receive, and attempt to steer us together toward that day’s goal. It is a dance that captures “the paradox of freedom and discipline” (Palmer 84). I must be open enough to allow students to express themselves, while being assertive enough to guide them in respecting the classroom atmosphere.

In addition to Scott and students like him (if there *are* students like him), the population of my theatre class is made up of students of virtually every demographic our high school has to offer: highly gifted students, typically young ladies, who prefer to sit in the back devouring the *Illiad*, *Macbeth*, or *Guns, Germs, and Steel* for their honors English and history classes. Time and again, I've witnessed them thoughtfully and thoroughly crank out written assignments in hopes of going back to their reading unnoticed, and I've seen them battle through spells of terror as they are compelled to take the spotlight in front of such a large and raucous group, their meek voices struggling to be heard in such a large space. There are several gregarious students, typically three or four young men and a couple of young ladies in a drama class because they assume it will be easy, who will push and pull the spotlight back and forth as the semester progresses in an attempt to entertain their way to a good grade. There are inevitably two or three kids who wind up in the course as a sort of last stop. They need the credits to graduate or have been mandated by the courts to be in school all day each day, but have been removed from other classes, and the counselors believe this will be a good place for them to engage in something unconventional that just might stick until the end of the year.

Each of these students has a story, as do the twenty-some others who don't immediately catch my attention, as I step in front of this group of thirty-four kids, and four other groups just like them as the day unfolds. Three levels raked in front of me; a squirming, laughing, lounging, shouting, or resigned-to-the-quiet-margins collective, energetically awaiting the time when my voice is raised, my opening monologue starts, and it's time to begin.

I come to school each day for the opportunity to take part in the discursive relationship with students that I love. It is all the elements of my lived experience—past, present, future—woven among the many facets of my personality, my passions, and my understanding of the world, which create the tapestry of my teaching persona. When I add that narrative to the heteroglossia of my classroom, the fact that each one of my students enters each day with a tapestry of his or her own, I cultivate a community that can engage in authentic and sustained learning.

Because of the cultural mythology associated with the term *teacher*, I feel obligated to confirm that I am not harboring any secrets so dark that they might disqualify me from my teaching position at a public high school. I believe I am well respected. I care deeply for my students, and I know that many of them feel the same way about me. I think I am good at teaching, energetic and passionate; I pride myself on luring reluctant students into the discourse of the classroom. This is me today, the professional me, *the teacher*. But it has been a long journey from my days as a high school student to those as a high school teacher. Though my story may not be all that different from many others who could fill evenings with tales of drug- and alcohol-induced antics, arrests, lost jobs, and car accidents, it is generally not the narrative associated with one charged with leading our children.

In *Practice Makes Practice*, Deborah Britzman examines the most common incarnations of the teacher myth. First, the notion that “*Everything depends on the teacher*” assumes the teacher as a rigid figure who must maintain control in the classroom in order to be effective.



[U]nless the teacher establishes control, there will be no learning; and if the teacher does not control the students, the students will control the teacher. This power struggle, predicated upon the institutional expectation that teachers individually control their classes, constructs learning as synonymous with control (Britzman 223).

The idea that a competent teacher is in control of his or her students at all times is among the most troubling of classroom mythologies, especially if we think of the classroom as a metaphor for the human experience. The harder I work to manipulate outcomes to suit my desires, the more likely I am to find myself scratching my head, wondering what went wrong.

The second preconception about teacher identity is the teacher as an inexhaustible source of knowledge. This Britzman calls the “Teacher- as-Expert” myth, which presents the teacher as a person, both “knowing how to teach and knowing everything there is to know about the material” (227). Inevitably this fallacy leads to a level of insecurity for young teachers who feel as if they could not possibly possess the knowledge necessary for this type of expertise. Moreover, the teacher-as-expert myth leads to sort of tacit dishonesty, as we seek to cover up a lack of knowledge by pretending we know more than we actually do in an effort to feel qualified.

The third face of the teacher archetype is that “Teachers are Self-Made” (230). That is, he or she somehow “possesses [the] talent, intuition, and common sense...” that suggest a life destined for the classroom (ibid). Certain people are born to teach, according to this mythology, and certain people are not. This lends itself to the teacher-as-martyr mentality or the cultural acceptance of the teacher as naturally selfless that so

often lead us to feel obligated to give our whole lives to our profession with little extrinsic recognition or reward, since we have chosen to heed this call.

These mythologies are shallow and dualistic, but they hold tremendous socio-cultural sway. Like many elements of our cultural narrative, the need to simplify in order to categorize and understand extracts the humanity from identity, reducing educators to servants of the larger ideological agenda. Chances are, when most of us think of teachers, one of two or three images comes to mind.

On the one hand, teachers are often idealized as dedicated, creative, caring, and valiant in the face of massive changes in the culture, and on the other hand, they are characterized as inept technicians, burned out and besieged by the difficulties of teaching and powerless in the face of complex social change ... Few depictions of teachers capture them as whole beings or suggest that teachers' lives, personalities, and characters are connected to the work they do in classrooms" (Britzman 34-35).

I am certainly no Jaime Escalante, though I'm not an Edna Crabapple, either. For most, however, the phrase *good teacher* conjures something between these two, images of a stern but loving leader who is in absolute control of his or her classroom and students at all times and, in the case of English, has a masterful knowledge of grammar.

One result of our cultural image of a teacher as administrator of control and order is that teachers feel the need to construct as much certainty as possible in their classrooms. This often means developing an identity that avoids showing vulnerability that would be perceived as weakness, resulting in an uncertainty that threatens our sense of personal and professional security. These myths actually

provide a semblance of order, control, and certainty in the face of the uncertainty and vulnerability of the teacher's world. Given the emphasis on social control in the school context, order and certainty are constructed as significant psychological and institutional needs (222).

But in doing so, teachers tend to relinquish their most precious asset, their humanity.

Most of us can remember a time when we encountered a teacher outside the context of the classroom, in the parking lot of the mall or at the grocery store. It is likely we felt a momentary disorientation, followed by the awkwardness of trying to decide whether to speak to her or pretend you hadn't seen her. The cultural myth of the teacher suggests only *part* of a human being.

The ethos of teacher as authority figure is the foundation upon which many of us build classroom communities. While this emphasis on control and order can provide the comfort of security, if not cultivated carefully it can remove the humanity from education and the classroom experience from the lived world. In *Teaching Community*, bell hooks argues that

Authoritarian practices, promoted and encouraged by many institutions, undermine democratic education in the classroom. By undermining education as the practice of freedom, authoritarianism in the classroom dehumanizes and thus shuts down the "magic" that is always present when individuals are active learners (43).

Paulo Freire, in *Education for Critical Consciousness*, writes that effective education results from a student's ability to organically integrate him- or herself into a community in order to be an engaged member of the larger culture.

Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality plus the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality. To the extent that man loses his ability to make choices and is subjected to the choices of others, to the extent that his choices are no longer his own because they result from external prescriptions, he is no longer integrated (4).

Authoritarian institutional practices reinforce a reductionist cultural paradigm built upon binaries of all kinds: mind/body, public/private, rational/irrational, intellect/emotion, masculine/feminine (among many others), which simplify experience and discourage meaningful discourse. “Such [dualistic] organization splits off and artificially limits vast areas of experience,” since lived experience typically does not adhere to such simplification (Pryor 4). “Such experiences of disembodiment affect all our activities and social interactions, including the activities and social interactions of pedagogy” (ibid). While binaries will always exist and are not necessarily harmful in and of themselves, they need not limit or define us. Palmer writes that we must embrace a view of the world in which opposites are joined, so that “we can see the world clearly and see it whole” (66). We must embrace ourselves and the world outside ourselves as a spectrum of multiple voices, living in the *both-and* instead of the *either-or*.

As a teacher, there is no way for me to ignore the many voices that compose my teacher identity. The process of learning to teach is a process of learning how to navigate the many voices of one’s past and present. This image is dialogic:

teaching must be situated in relationship to one’s biography, present circumstances, deep commitments, affective investments, social context, and conflicting discourses . . . With this dialogic understanding, teaching can be

reconceptualized as a struggle for voice and discursive practices amid a cacophony of past and present voices, lived experiences, and available practices (Britzman 8).

Britzman, Ritchie and Wilson, and others cite the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin as metaphorical for teacher identity. Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic, or *novelistic* as he calls it, applies because there is no single way to be a good teacher, just as there is no one way to be a good student, or a good human being. The identity of a teacher is dialogic, as is that of each student in our classes. We enter with varied interests, passions, and quirks, as well as a multitude of lived experiences that invariably deepen classroom discourse. The classroom, then, is dialogic on multiple levels; just as a single bridge cable that can carry thousands of tons is woven of dozens of smaller cables, which are in turn woven from even smaller threads of steel. In a similar fashion, argues Bakhtin, the author's purpose is made clearer by populating a fictive world with a multitude of disparate characters who work together through their interaction in the text to advance the author's single thematic observation.

Therefore they are all able to enter into the unitary plane of the novel, which can unite in itself parodic stylizations of generic languages, various forms of stylizations and illustrations of professional and period-bound languages, the language of particular generations, of social dialects, and others ... may all be drawn in by the novelist for the orchestration of his themes and for the refracted (indirect) expression of his intentions and values (Bakhtin 292).

Bakhtin's notion of "novelistic" discourse serves as an effective metaphor for both the dialectical relationships of the classroom and the identity of the individual teacher or

student who enters it – both the smaller and the larger cables. Instead of the dualistic image of *teacher* as authority and *student* as eager receptacle, we have something more complex and rich.

Produced, because of social interaction, subject to negotiation, consent, and circumstance, inscribed with power and desire, and always in process of becoming, these dialogic relations determine the very texture of teaching and the possibilities it opens ... negotiating among what may seem to be conflicting visions, disparaging considerations, and contesting interpretations about social practice and the teacher's identity is part of the hidden work of learning to teach (Britzman 3).

This is a complex commitment, since students as whole human beings can be difficult to communicate with in larger numbers, and vulnerability implicit in instruction that reveals humanity can lead to fear of loss of control, but we must embrace them, encourage them, and accept them in order to cultivate critical thinking and a humanistic approach to pedagogy in the face of an increasingly standardized (and inhuman) educational paradigm. As Freire asserts, “dialogue creates a critical attitude (that is) nourished by love, humility, hope, faith, and trust. When the two ‘poles’ of the dialogue are thus linked by love, hope, and mutual trust, they can join a critical search for something. Only dialogue truly communicates” (45).

The human disconnect that resulted from reductionist binaries and an absence of dialogue is a fundamental reason why I so strongly resisted authority as a junior high and high school student. I felt no empathetic connection with most of the administrators of control and order. I felt they had no concern for me in any way, other than their need to

tell me how I should live my life in order to achieve success and happiness. All may not have been lost, however, if I would have believed that more of those teachers and administrators had actually occupied the intellectual and emotional space that I occupied. I simply could not see them as whole human beings, and I was afraid that, unless I was the very best at everything I did, they would not see me that way either.

I've been tempted during my six-plus years of teaching to speak to the counseling team or the administration about my past, just to mention my sobriety in case they think I could be of service to students who are in the grips of drug and alcohol abuse. I once seriously considered raising the topic to my principal, whom I respect tremendously and feel very comfortable speaking to, thinking that she might be interested in having students connect with me as a sort of "trusted" adult they could speak to in confidence about their issues. Perhaps I could provide guidance since, more than likely, I've been where they are. But two thoughts followed: 1) the quiet shame I seem to associate with my history of addiction, at least with regard to my role as a professional educator, and 2) my ambivalence about the possibility of having any kind of effect on a teenager at risk, or in the grips of, alcoholism or addiction. In this respect, I reflect on my own high school years, when I would likely have found such a conversation with a trusted adult amusing (though a bit frightening), would no doubt have viewed that person in a different light and respected him or her a little more, but it would have in no way changed my behavior. I'm not sure there was anything anyone could have said that would have made a difference.

One of the enduring memories of my sophomore year was of stretching before baseball practice one afternoon in the gym. Since it was the first week of practice, tryouts week, all three grades, sophomore through senior, were gathered together. As my coach entered the gym with his swagger, aggressive gum chewing, Fu Manchu mustache, and old-school view of what it meant to be an athlete, he began scanning the gym for a target.

“Gealy! Where’s Gealy at?” His shouts filled the gym as he looked to the older players for guidance. A couple guys gestured, grinning, to where I sat sheepishly in the “butterfly” position, the soles of my feet together, elbows pressed down on my knees. “Gealy! I thought I told you to cut that goddamn hair! Don’t make me have to say it again.” By the time my senior year came, I didn’t play baseball anymore. The pressure to conform and to perform was too great, and I tended to commit errors or strike out when I felt the coach’s condemning eyes on me, so I said screw it, and opted to have fun instead.

I remember the sentiment well. I thrived on pushing limits, on being the best at things the system told me I couldn’t do. After two or three years of what I’d call binge experimentation with alcohol, marijuana, and various other recreational drugs, by the time I was a sophomore in high school I was smoking pot pretty much every day. In the booze and the drugs I found something that made me feel alive, gave me confidence, a sense of humor, and made me popular among the kids whose admiration I longed for. It made life seem so much simpler and so much more engaging, and it made me feel wonderful.



By ninth grade, this other life totally turned me on. It gave me the inkling that I had been exposed to some sacred truth to which the “establishment” had no access. I felt it when I read *Scratchin’ on the Eight Ball* for the first time in eighth grade, or later, *No One Here Gets Out Alive*, *On the Road*, or *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, or when I saw Coppola’s *The Outsiders*, and read Hinton’s novel. I felt it surge through my veins when listening to Black Sabbath or Public Enemy or Hendrix or The Grateful Dead. I lived for the chance to kick back with my buddies and engage in long existential conversations on seemingly endless weekday evenings, getting baked in somebody’s mom’s station wagon, or in the sewer tunnel behind Shopko; it was deeply enmeshed with my sense of truth and higher purpose, and it gave me a bulletproof sense of swagger. In school the message seemed to be that success meant full compliance with cultural norms, and this felt like a betrayal of something higher or more sacred. If I had to choose one path or the other, I felt that, to honor my very soul, I had to choose *truth*. Once I started down that path, I don’t think there was anything anyone could have done or said to change my mind.

A few years before, I was something of an anomaly among the kids I ran around with. In my early teens, I was praised by teammates for being among the “toughest” kids on the football field and was the star in pretty much every sport I played, but when the season came to a close I would have to fight breaking into tears in the team huddle, overcome with nostalgia as the memories of the season looped through my mind.

This sensitivity was at odds with my understanding of what it meant to be a man. As a seventh-grader in a junior high with over a thousand students, I felt it was my duty to make a name for myself. The only way to do this that I could see was to gain a

foothold among a group that I perceived to be the coolest guys in school. Many of them lived in or near my neighborhood, and as the summer after sixth grade became the spring of seventh, I was spending more time among them.

But admission came with a price. I tended to take things seriously, didn't brush off insults easily, and I probably tried too hard to fit in. This made me a target. The guys would often toss barbs at me, and laugh when I was slow with a witty response, then tell me I needed to chill when I became noticeably uncomfortable or embarrassed. When we cruised the neighborhood on our bikes, they'd break into a sudden sprint—something they'd apparently planned ahead of time—and leave me behind. They pinned me in agonizing wrestling holds until I tearfully begged them to let me go. Once two of them gave me a snuggie so bad that they tore my underwear off and left me bleeding. Another time we were wading in a pond in a vacant lot behind my house. The guys each bet me a buck that I couldn't hold my breath for forty-five seconds. I was so naïve. When I surfaced and managed to wipe enough of swampy water from my eyes to see, I realized they were all four in a circle, peeing flush on top of my head. A choral pee, I guess you could call it. It's all pretty funny now, but at the time, the cumulative effect was devastating.

What I really wanted was to be accepted by these guys, and to be respected. Despite their occasionally heartless and juvenile antics, they were great guys, and we had great times together. Little by little, by midway through seventh grade, I felt as if I was finally gaining admittance to their elite world, and I was learning to lighten up in the process. But it would take something more to secure my place in the group.

After our first introduction to recreational drinking and pot smoking in seventh grade, I instantly found what I'd been missing. I became the one who was always up for a party, could drink the most, smoke the most, and stay up the latest. I was also the first one to get in trouble, narrowly missing my mom with vomit after a half-day Keystone Light bender in the fort we had built from cast off construction materials and tree branches in a stand of cottonwoods in the fields south of my neighborhood. The guys thought I was fearless, and they took to calling me by my middle name "*Verno's in the house!*" or "*Dude, Vern's crazy!*" They began greeting me with my new single-syllable moniker, "*What up, V?*" Suddenly, many of *them* were actually looking up to *me*. But what felt most sacred when I was thirteen or fourteen, was that suddenly I'd found the means to escape restlessness and boredom, to have the time of my life whenever I wanted, and I never had to be soft or sensitive again.

It's a Thursday in mid-October and the bell has just indicated that it is time to start our second period intro to theatre class. Samantha has asked to run the computer as I run through a couple PowerPoint slides that outline the day's activity and reinforce some ongoing ideas. Sam is quite social, as many freshmen girls are, and she is easily distracted. She is both pretty and charismatic, and has loads of energy, but when guided, motivated, and held accountable, will go on to demonstrate an impressive capacity to deliver a poised and assertive performance. Sam is the type of student toward whom others gravitate, especially the numerous freshmen girls in the class. If I can earn her respect, others' will naturally follow. She's typically joined at the hip by another

freshmen named Brooke, whose older brother was one of my favorites in intro to theatre a few years back, though I could never quite convince him to put in the work outside of class to make his performances as good as they could have been. Still, Branson was *my boy*, and though he never worked any harder than he felt he had to, he was always eager to give the process a shot, and was able to shape his aloof cool into a rousing monologue performance from Lyle Kessler's *Orphans* for his final project.

Lakota, who is back in school this fall after some legal trouble in the spring and a stint in rehab, lounges with a cool-calm at the center of a small group of young men who seem the type to give teachers fits with their carefree eagerness to challenge, their tank tops and tattoos, ball caps on their desks in front of them, and, of course, no books or book bags. But Lakota at their center has a level of respect and humility that suggests to me that his sobriety just might stick, if only he's not too young. Among this small group is Skyelar, who leans forward on the edge of his chair laughing, phone in one hand connected to headphones casually draped over his ears, a pristine ball cap in his other hand. Skyelar has been responsive to direction, respectful and polite, though never letting go of his cool. He's one of the younger kids who looks up to Lakota, but clearly has not grasped the urge to go straight. He's willing enough to take creative risks when he gets to class, but I sense his salesmanship; he's got a knack for doing or saying just the right thing to satisfy you so you'll leave him to his devices. He's got the raw skills to be a wonderful actor. Before the semester ends, he will be expelled from school and I won't see him again. In mid-October, Lakota was waiting for yet another court date, and he too would not finish the semester.

Pockets of students are spread around the classroom, two and three to a table: Sydney, Scott and Nolan; Sunny D, Dalton (who I call crazy legs, for his tendency to break into dance during our daily warm-ups), and Robert (“Bob Man”), another student who always volunteers to run the computer when I show movies or presentations. Ricardo, a big-for-his-age ninth-grader who goes by Ricky, almost cannot get through a sentence if asked to read aloud from a handout or a script, but who is poised and spontaneously playful in front of the group. Before the semester is over, he will blossom when given the chance to listen to someone else read his lines while he memorizes them, and go on to play lovably hilarious Robin Starveling in our spring production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Ema, whose family lives in my neighborhood and whose older sister Hana I had in two separate English courses, is among three daughters of parents who fled Bosnia in the mid ‘90s. They, and twenty-some others whom I’ve slowly gotten to know as the semester has progressed, come together to push, pull, challenge, frustrate, and bolster me with pride as I attempt to orchestrate each day’s adventure.

I suppose I didn’t—I don’t—fit the image that first comes to mind when the term *alcoholic* is mentioned. I was young when I drank, and young when I got sober. I did not come from abusive parents or a broken home. Like many of us, I come from a complicated family history. Though I’m not entirely sure where I stand on the notion of alcoholism as a *disease*, I do know that the propensity for alcoholism is woven deep into

the fabric of who I am, and it is for this reason that I've been clean and sober since January 17<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

My alcoholism has something to do with emptiness. It's a common notion heard around recovery circles, and my story is no exception. From the time I was very little, I remember being afraid; I remember the fear of a great void, like some calamity could be lurking around the next corner, yet I was too young to know what it was. When I began spending the night away from home, probably in the fourth or fifth grade, I would grow increasingly anxious as the evening wore on, then wake in the middle of the night terrified and overcome with sadness. I always equated it with homesickness, and since I was nearing the age when being a boy meant being tough and unafraid, it was something that I did everything I could to endure without showing weakness.

I remember lying awake most of the night on a Boy Scout camping trip, probably as an eleven- or twelve-year-old, mixed with a combination of fear and deep sadness. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore, and gently awoke another boy's father, telling him that I didn't feel well and would like to call my parents to pick me up. He drove me to a gas station a few miles from the lake where we were camping and gave me a quarter so I could call home. My dad, thinking it was something I needed to face and grow out of, thoughtfully and compassionately told me he would not come get me, reassuring me that I would soon fall asleep and would wake up in the morning to realize that everything was alright.

I *was* alright. In fact, I don't remember anything after that phone call. I'm sure I was so tired at that point that I finally surrendered to sleep, aided by the reassuring voice of my dad. This scene was repeated—minus the phone call—in several memories I have

of overnights. I chalked it up to being a “sensitive” kid who was homesick due to a strong attachment to his parents, but the scariest time came when it began happening to me at home in my own bed. I remember one night, at maybe twelve years old, sitting on the stairs outside my parents’ bedroom crying. The fear and sadness wouldn’t go away—it felt like homesickness—but I *was* home. My parents were no more than fifteen feet away. I remember my dad sitting up in bed, looking around as he got his bearings and zeroed in on the source of the sound. When he got out of bed and came to comfort me and ask me what was wrong, I had no idea what to say.

The sense of panic has come and gone over the years. There was a period of time in my late teens and early twenties when it would surface multiple times every day, and when walking through the grocery store or driving on the interstate would trigger a panic so severe that my heart would race, I’d break into a cold sweat, and have the almost overwhelming sensation that I was falling. After getting sober at 23, it didn’t plague me so persistently, but there are times even today when I’m teaching that the wave washes over me as intensely as ever.

The best analogy I can give is the sensation of standing on the ledge of a tall building, with the overwhelming sense that if you move, the world will tilt on its axis and you’ll be swallowed by the sheer enormity of the space. Though I’ve dealt with it in most every context since I was a kid, there’s something so incredibly immediate about having it happen while I’m standing in front of 30 students leading a discussion or lecturing. Immediately following the flood of adrenaline comes a need to find an anchor. I sense myself moving toward a solid object, a table, a lectern, or a student desk as I struggle to remain poised and in control, aware of my surroundings and my

circumstances, dangling, even letting go while eschewing the added narrative of panic. The thing about standing in front of so many students is the overwhelming sense of accountability; there is nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. The teacher has no choice but to move forward, to *lean into* the rush of anxiety, to feel it, acknowledge it, and to keep going. I think of it as *teaching on fire*, because the sense is of a powerful ignition made up of the often-indistinguishable feelings of overwhelming panic and sheer exhilaration. Perhaps it is both, and neither. The best I can do is to turn it into fuel to push me deeper into the moment, but I always battle the intense fear of losing control, and the desire to label myself as crazy, inept, or unfit to lead. At some point, I always come back to the interior mantra that keeps me present and allows me to dwell in the immediacy of the moment; I love these people, and they love me. There is nothing to fear, and this flood of feeling is only the intensity of being alive. This too, I like to think, is the *fundamental ambiguity of being human* (Chodron).

If I teach who I am, then who I am is constantly on display when I'm in front of the class. But if my life has tended to be an act of running—from something, toward something—the classroom is a lived-dance with and in front of my students, and is an escape from the constancy of that race. The immediacy of the moment is a razor's edge between being wholly present and paralyzed by fear. The high level of anxiety, even occasional moments of dissociative panic, means I'm riding a wave of intensity that threatens to wash over me. The other day at the end of my fourth-period plan, minutes before my students would again come streaming in, I could feel the beginning of that paralyzing fear, the disorientation, the distant and muted sounds, the tension in my stomach, so I grabbed a note pad and began to scribble my thoughts; *I battle my fear with*



*love. When I begin to feel paralyzed with anxiety or panic in the classroom, I must surrender to the love I have for my students and remember that I am safe, that we're all in this together.*

I was eleven years old when I found out how my grandfather died. My mom was asleep in the backseat of our Cutlass Supreme next to my sister. I sat up front with Dad as we made our way east on I-70 through the Rockies deep into a July night. Our family vacation had been cut short by two days because of the death of my dad's mother. The sad though not unexpected news brought about a candor in my father that I had rarely experienced. Since he and I were the only ones awake and death was lurking just below every attempt at casual conversation, it didn't take long before he settled into the opportunity he'd been waiting for all of my life. His gaze was lit by the soft glow of the instrument panel, and the ambient hum of tires and muted dialogue of AM radio was broken once an hour by the driver's side window, rolled down just enough to draw out the ribbon of smoke from his Winston Light, but as tenderly as a power window can be rolled down, so as not to disturb the sleep of my mom or sister.

Chief among the revelations was the truth about my maternal grandfather who had died before I was born. I had never really heard much about him. In fact, at that point I don't think I'd ever even seen a picture of him. He began gently, but with conviction. "You know, I don't think we've ever told you that Kath's dad killed himself the summer after we started dating." He gave me a moment before he went on. "His name was Bill Waggoner, and he was a heck of a nice guy. But he was an alcoholic and he struggled

with depression, but nobody knows for sure why he did it.” He let his glance rest for a few seconds on my mom and my little sister in the backseat. “Your mom doesn’t talk about it. After it happened, she had to be there for her mom, to be strong, and since it was such a horrible time and a horrible thing that he did to them, I guess they just tried to put it behind them.” He looked over at me, then let his gaze rest once more on the view of the darkened backseat, not so much out of fear someone would hear, but out of the deep love and contentment born of piloting the most precious cargo in the world safely down a mountain freeway in the dead of night toward the town where he grew up, and where he would be present for the burial of his mother.

Silence again, and the hum of the road, as I allowed the revelation to sink in. I don’t remember if I asked questions, though I’m sure, if I could have conceptualized them, I would have had plenty. My mother’s mother had remarried about a year before I was born, and my Grandpa Howard was probably the man, other than my father, whom I most wanted to be when I grew up. Though I had never really understood why, nor taken the time to ask, it had always been clear that Grandpa Howard was not my mom’s real father. I suppose I’d wondered about it from time to time, but I had a sense that this was just the way things were, and that the details were better left unsaid.

I’ve never spoken to my mom about her father’s death. Occasionally, after I got out of high school, she would mention him, usually in the context of genetically inherited traits, like *My dad was pretty tall and slender*, or, *My dad always had a full head of hair*. Never spoken of, however, was his drinking, his increasingly erratic behavior, his depression, or his suicide. Many years later, my dad would confide in me some of the

low points faced between him and my mother during my late teen years and early twenties. “She looks at you,” I remember him once saying, “and she sees her father.”

My mom was twenty when he died. According to the story my dad related to me sometime in my teen years, my grandfather had been out working on the farm and came back to the house to get a shotgun, saying something about a coyote harassing cattle. When he didn’t come back that night, my grandmother put the word out among family and friends. She and my mother were walking through a pasture not far from their house when they spotted his car. I don’t know the details of what came next. I can’t pretend to imagine their thoughts or the palpable fear that must have burst in their stomachs as they approached the car. I don’t know if it was my mother who opened the door or my grandmother, or if they even could. I don’t know what they might have seen inside if they did, though I’ve often imagined what it must have been like. A farmer in his middle forties dead in the back seat of the family car, the victim of a self-inflicted shotgun blast to the head. A husband. A father. The desperation it must have taken to get him to that point, and the life-stopping agony it must have meant for his wife and his children.

The drive through the night that had fostered this revelation was most directly related to my father, however. We were, after all, making the geographical and psychological transition from summer vacation to the funeral of his mother. Though he would explain in great detail over the years, and it’s impossible for me from this vantage point to remember exactly what he told us on that July trip through eastern Colorado, I’m certain that night was also the first time my dad told me that for much of his life, he had hated his mother. I remember being perplexed at his lack of apparent emotion at the news of her death, and I think he felt the need to explain. I remember his voice cracking

slightly when he broke the news that she had died—I had just finished taking a shower, and I remember the dark stone, wood paneling, and deep earthen colors of our condo outside of Dillon—but he didn’t cry. If anything, I imagine, the emotion was part of the more general relationship between parents and their children. His mom was gone. He had us, and he had my mom. One of life’s inevitabilities had finally come, and it was his duty to face it.

He didn’t cry at her funeral or at the graveside service. He couldn’t, he said; she hurt him too badly, for too many years. He was never good enough for her. He was too much like his father, whom she saw as a liar, a crook, and a drunk. Supposedly, she had tried to kill his father (or him, her), and eventually she kicked him out. When my dad’s parents divorced, he was four years old—not yet in kindergarten—virtually unheard of in a small Nebraska town in 1957. But my dad idolized his father, as most four-year-olds do, and she wouldn’t let them see each other. My grandfather was driving a long-haul truck at the time, and my dad remembers sneaking out of the house and around the block so he could climb into the cab of his truck for a quick visit with the man who was his hero but whom he was not allowed to see.

As he grew into his teen years, my dad could never gain the favor of his mom. She’d done so much to insult and injure him that he decided he would do everything he could to live up to her disappointment. He quit trying in school, he mouthed off to her, he got in fights, he talked back to teachers, and tried to suppress disturbing thoughts of taking out his aggression on cats in the neighborhood.

My grandmother always reminded me of Jackie Kennedy, with her pink tailored suits and matching hats, her slight build, her pearls, and what always struck me as

refinement. She drove nothing but Cadillacs, and bought a new one every few years. I always imagined she must have been from the coast, maybe Connecticut or New York; she seemed out of place on the plains of Nebraska. But this refinement could turn sharp as a razor if you crossed her, and this was apparently the side of her with which my dad was most familiar.

Eventually he was allowed to visit his dad and, by his early teens, spent the summers working on my grandfather's farm in the northwestern corner of the state. The August after his freshman year in high school, he simply stayed. He would never live with his mother again. She never forgave him for that.

As we made our way out of Colorado and onto the plains of western Nebraska, I knew very few of these details, but the heaviness of death and the legacy of family known and unknown hung in the car. I felt grown up, and a strange combination of pride for my apparent maturity in being confided to and sadness for the tremendous pain that I now knew lingered just below the surface. As I look back now, I think I always sensed it was there, I just didn't know what it was or where it came from.

I don't feel the need to condemn myself for the decisions I made when I was in my teens and early twenties. I am not apologizing for, justifying, nor condoning my behavior, and I don't seek to warn young people of the evils of the path I chose. I only hope to reconcile those identities and to explore the role my narrative plays in the formulation of my pedagogy. Moreover, in my classroom I hope to combat the institutional issues that contributed to my resentment, rebellion, and self-destruction, as

well to deconstruct some of the cultural binaries that informed my life as a young person. Many of these binaries I acted out against, and some of them continue to haunt me as I seek to be the *best teacher and person I can be*, a phrase that echoes the very dualistic paradigm I've spent so much time rejecting. Nevertheless, I subscribed to this narrative of performance through my first six years of teaching, often, I believe, at the expense of my humanity. I can't help but feel too, the shadows of the deep sense of shame that I've spent years quietly trying to put behind me. I often heard it said in AA meetings that *Alcohol is but a symptom of my disease* (Alcoholics Anonymous 64). Maybe this disease is the shame that preceded the drinking, the drugs, and the misbehavior – the terrible fear of not being good enough threatens to haunt everything I do.

I got sober when I was 23. I went through a thirty-day inpatient treatment program (my third since I was 16), this time remaining in a halfway house for three months beyond the initial thirty days. For a year I worked construction and cleaned stables; I house sat for friends and friends of friends, and I did odd jobs. For a year, I went to an AA meeting every day. Eventually I moved back to Lincoln, took two years to finish my undergraduate degree, then moved to New York. Two years later, I returned to my hometown, got a job working nights as a line cook, took out some student loans and enrolled in a teacher certification program. Just as I had a couple years before, I threw myself into my studies completely, determined to make up for all of the opportunities I'd wasted over the years.

Since I was very young, I had been told (directly and indirectly) of the potential that I had, that I could do whatever I wanted, that I was bound to be a success. But mostly, since I was about fifteen, I rebelled against all that, for a while very secretly, but

eventually, very much in the open. I was determined to do something meaningful, something outside what I perceived to be the stupid rat race of grades and money and accomplishment that felt so superficial and so far removed from everything that mattered to me. It all seemed so pointless, and I had no desire to do whatever it was I was *supposed to do* to make it in that world. After high school and before sobriety, I made a couple failed attempts at college, but I could never string together more than a couple of semesters in a row. I bounced around the country a little, working odd jobs and taking some classes, looking for purpose or meaning, but mostly, as it turned out, just looking for escape. What I had become best at, drinking, was wrecking me. I was emotionally and physically destroying myself. I used to joke that I was either the best drinker of anyone I knew, or the worst; I didn't know which. By the end of 1999, there was simply no way for me to keep living that way, and I had to start over.

After about four years of sobriety and much thought about how best to unite my professional life and my personal interests, going back to school to become certified to teach English seemed the perfect fit. English classes were the only ones that ever really resonated with me, and I'd spent quite a bit of time reading and writing since I was a kid (though mostly outside of school). It also felt like I was honoring my desire to cultivate meaning in my life, doing something to help people and something *intellectual*, rather than just seeking professional or financial gain. So, I was bent on redemption, determined to make my parents proud and to show the world, but mostly myself, that I could be successful within the system and that I could do something meaningful. For as long as I could remember, I was nurtured to believe that *you can do anything, be*

*anything, have anything, as long as you put your mind to it.* Well, I was 28 years old and ready to really *apply myself*, and excited to see where I would end up.

I did that, and I got a job as an English teacher and the director of a high school theatre program before I'd even had the chance to student teach. Before I knew it, I was auditioning kids for musicals and teaching five preps and six classes, just trying to stay afloat. But I was determined to prove myself. If I was awake, I was probably working, terrified that I would let my students down, my colleagues, the administrators that hired me, my parents. My value was so knit up in being "the best" teacher I could be, that there was little room for anything else and little option, I felt, if it didn't work out. Checking emails, reading and re-reading books I'd never gotten around to when I was in high school—the *Odyssey*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Animal Farm*—scribbling discussion questions in the margins and at the ends of chapters. I had rehearsals for plays and musicals every day after school and many evenings, and spent plan periods tending to administrative duties as the director of theatre. The weekends I spent grading papers.

Since I was hired before I'd actually finished my certification program and without student teaching, I also spent an evening or two each week of that first two years in class at the university, and I read textbooks on the weekends or late at night, after I finished the reading I'd assigned my ninth-graders or my Shakespeare students. I was determined to be the best I could be, determined to redeem myself, but I was living an unsustainable life. It seemed that the harder I worked, the more I realized needed to be done. This, coupled with the archetype of the selfless teacher, led me to near constant anxiety that I wasn't doing enough for my students, and the belief that, unless I devoted virtually all of my time to teaching, I was not doing my job. And of course, lurking



somewhere just below the surface was the fear that someone would find out what kind of high school student *I* had been, and that the privilege of this position could be revoked.

In order to vindicate myself, I had to be the best.

I stuck with it, though, even when it appeared I was headed toward burnout, partially out of fear of failure, but mainly because of the community I sensed I was creating in my classroom. The time spent with my students was something that mattered, something special that I shared with those kids, and I had the sustaining sense that this life was the one I was meant to live.

In every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than on the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood—and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning (Palmer 10).

Engaging in the real-time work of learning with my students made me vulnerable, but it also established an atmosphere that often felt lively and empowering.

I think this is why I've been able to feel successful through my first six-plus years of teaching. I'm sure I have never been considered for any awards. I've regularly felt ill-prepared, often learning the subject right along with my students, since very little of my teacher training taught me such practical content or skills as rules of grammar, syntax, canonical high school texts, or classroom management strategies. For significant stretches of time I didn't have time to do anything but hang on, unable to avoid the pitfalls that many overburdened teachers face: the occasional packets of study questions, videos, "work days," and, worst of all, the inability to intervene in my students' writing or skills practice enough to actually advance their knowledge, instead simply sliding

them through with Bs or Cs as I very carefully chose my battles. But I was there with the students every day, getting to know them, nudging them, laughing with them, and listening to them. In this way I was pulling them into the classroom discourse. Through lecturing and facilitating discussions based on loose notes and an idea of where I wanted us to go, constantly evaluating and adjusting in order to maximize the number of students who I know were with me, I hung on and my students and I pushed through together. Often, my improvised *song and dance* (which, frequently, it quite literally was) was absolutely exhausting, certainly more taxing than PowerPoints, textbooks, worksheets, and study guides, but I was earning my students' trust and throwing myself into the fire with them. I had no idea how else to create the magic of passionate engagement in common endeavor, a magic that comes from working together to make discoveries, develop skills, and learn from one another, not from me giving them tasks to complete or facts to memorize.

Now in my seventh year, I've finally given up directing. Though I loved working with the kids to develop passion for the arts, I was on the fast track to burnout and had pushed aside virtually everything else in my life. Now I teach AP Lit, a weighted Shakespeare course, and freshman honors English. Interestingly, none of these are courses I would have considered taking when I was in high school. Because of my academic ethos in the classroom, it has become natural to hide the person I once was. I'm not embarrassed by it or ashamed of it, but it's so far removed from the man I am today, it seems a vague image of a bygone time. Perhaps a certain shame does linger; if they knew who I really was, I wouldn't be privileged to have *such a good job* at *such a good school* in *such a good district*. When the bell rings, though, and I'm on stage in

front of the kids or working with them in small groups, or just chatting with them one at a time, all of that melts away. For me, teaching is transcendence. It is an opportunity to reach outside myself and to connect with others. So I endeavor here, called by the inescapable urge to reconcile these narratives, because I know that each of them is part of my story, part of who I am.

Ritchie and Wilson argue that successful teaching hinges, in large part, on understanding how one's identity shapes his or her worldview, and therefore his or her approach to pedagogy.

The development of a professional identity is inextricable from personal identity and... when personal and professional development are brought into dialogue, when teachers are given the opportunity to compose and reflect on their own stories of learning and of selfhood within a supportive and challenging community, then teachers can begin to resist and revise the scripting narratives of the culture and begin to compose new narratives of identity and practice. They can begin to author their own development (1).

It is these "scripted narratives of the culture" that we must complicate. Life is not as simple as many of our students have been taught to believe it is, and teachers are not the one-dimensional figures that students so often perceive them to be. Teachers are human beings, and that humanity, vulnerability, honesty, and willingness to reach out to other human beings to build a small community of honesty and trust in the classroom is what makes great teaching.

That is also why I challenge the simplistic notions that too frequently dictate the ways in which we approach the classroom. So often we hear the term "independence"

invoked in public discourse. It gets tied up with nationalistic notions like freedom and patriotism, but true independence comes when we learn to explore the world around us from a more objective and humanistic standpoint, recognizing the forces of socialization at work in determining those things people often view as absolutes. True independence would mean the freedom to dictate one's own path, not the mandate to choose the one prescribed path that he or she feels best suited to. Eric Fromm explored this notion in his essay, "The Revolutionary Character."

It is an undeniable fact that this kind of independence, even though a person may earn his own living, marry, and bring up children of his own, does not mean that he has become truly free and independent. He is still, as an adult, rather helpless and in many ways trying to find powers to protect him and give him certainty.

The price he pays for this help is that he makes himself dependent on them, loses his freedom, and slows down the process of his growth. He borrows his thought from them, his feelings, his goals, his values—although he lives under the illusion that it is he who thinks, feels, and makes choices (155-156).

There is no doubt that our cultural definition of a teacher is one rife with duality, and that this cultural view informs, at least in part, the way I define myself professionally. I know it is a view I feel beholden to, consciously or not, and, I'm sure it is the reason I feel the need to suppress much of my student experience. Indeed, "[f]ew depictions of teachers capture them as whole beings or suggest that teachers' lives, personalities, and characters are connected to the work they do in classrooms" (Ritchie and Wilson 34-35). It is unfortunate that entering the classroom means feeling compelled to give up significant portions of one's life experience in order to don the mantle of educator.

What I seek more than anything is to reconcile these various identities in order to validate myself as a whole human being who, even as a professional educator, has nothing to feel shame for and can take pride in the work he does in the classroom while moving towards Fromm's notion of *true freedom and independence*. As Britzman asserts, "the startling idea that the taking up of an identity means suppressing aspects of the self. So, at first glance, becoming a teacher may mean becoming someone you are not" (4). But as she also reminds us, "no teaching identity is ever singular or without contradictions; the teacher's identity expresses a cacophony of calls" (222). Like the complexity of Sanders' narrative in "Under the Influence," my journey from student to educator has not been a simple one, illustrating the complexity of the many forces at work, both within and beyond my control. For the sake of the person and the professional I am today, I would not have it any other way.

I usually start class with an improvised monologue, often opening with a song triggered by something I've overheard students talking about. All it takes is a word and the song comes pouring out. Sometimes it turns into a game. The kids will challenge me with a word to see if I have a song for it. I can usually come up with something.

"Math!" Someone challenges.

*Hmmm*, I think.... "The geometry of innocence flesh on the bone / causes Galileo's math book to get thrown / at Delilah who's sitting worthlessly alone / but the tears on her cheeks are from laughter."

A bunch of students erupt in laughter. Bob-man shouts, “No way, Mr. G. You made that one up.”

“Nah, that’s Dylan. You don’t know that one? It’s on *Highway 61*. Classic. You’ve gotta check it out.”

It’s never something I thought would garner such an audience, but it’s turned out to be spontaneous and typically an effective way to get students’ attention. Today I work nearly all the way through my vocal register to conjure my best Garcia, as I pull the screen down and walk up to hold down the ‘power’ button on the overhead projector, triggered by who knows what.

*Reuben was strumming his painted mandolin,  
the breeze would pause to listen in, before goin’ its way again.  
Masquerade began when nightfall finally woke,  
Like waves against the bandstand dancers broke  
to the painted mandolin...*

As I scan the room to take attendance, I open a document on the projector with the day’s agenda listed in bullet points. Now student requests start pouring in.

“When do we need our scenes memorized by?”

“It’s written on the assignment sheet. The twenty-fifth, but I know you have at least the first page memorized, because I saw you perform it yesterday.”

“I already know my whole scene!” Comes a declaration from the front.

“Mr. Gealy, can we do improv today?” one student pleads.

“No, let’s watch another movie.” Movies and improv are the staple of student requests.

I don't acknowledge either. Instead, as I saunter back down the risers to pull down the screen, I launch into a few lines from the film we watched earlier in the semester: Blanche Dubois feigning innocence in her fluttering drawl: "I just come in on a little ol' streetcar named desire..." and then Brando's Kowalski, a voice that seems to crawl from under the back of his tongue and resonate out through his nostrils with the exhale of cigarette smoke: "Where's your fine feathers and furs, Stella?"

A girl in the back interrupts; "Stanley's hot!" which elicits giggles from across the room.

I counter in Stanley's voice; "You know you can catch cold sitting around in damp things, especially when you been exercising hard like bowling is..." Now more laughs. We wrote character analyses of the four main characters in the classic Elia Kazan version, so they get the joke. Most of them have never seen an entire black and white movie, but after the first day were mesmerized by Brando and Vivien Leigh, most having strong opinions about who the protagonist was, and who was the antagonist.

As the din of the black box increases once again, spurred, admittedly, by my digression into impersonation, I lift my hands above my shoulders and say "Whooooaahh!!!!" Something taken from a Western or in Little House on The Prairie when I was a kid, no doubt – I'm pulling back on the reins. I often think of teaching that way. I am like a conductor trying to harness a mass of energy, fueled by thirty-some eager, curious, resentful, excited, depressed, but all independent human beings, attempting to channel it in the direction I desire. It can become overwhelming and flatten anything in its path, or it can pick up steam, forming a sort of synergy that can take us someplace magical. There's no telling on which day which will happen, and on some

days both will happen, but this is the real reason why education will always be more of an art than a science.

Teaching theatre, and English to a slightly lesser degree, is about breaking down the pretenses so deeply ingrained in these kids by the world they live in. Ironically, it's the roles they play every day of their lives that have to be chipped away in order to get them to buy into acting. I work hard to get them out of themselves, as much as possible, and into the community of the classroom. We do all kinds of activities to break down barriers and build trust, constantly pushing boundaries and taking risks. It can be a stressful way to establish a classroom community, but for me, the reward far outweighs the risk.

I increase my voice to the full throat of its booming authority to fill the space and hold them through an explanation of the day's plan. On cue, the students rise and climb down from the risers to assemble in a large circle for a warm-up with some movement work. The students tend to assemble in clumps, some break into a sprint and take a flying leap from the last level of risers when finally given the chance to get out of their chairs, and some can muster no more than a leisurely shuffle. After warming up, we cool down by finding our physical centers, becoming aware of our breath, and settling into a "neutral position" as our weight is distributed equally to both feet, our knees very slightly bent, our shoulders back, spine straight, and chin slightly out. This basic act of establishing proper posture does wonders to settle the students' focus, though most cannot hold it for more than about 20 seconds.

We set up acting cubes in a semi-circle, some chairs to sit in, and the rest of the kids sit on the floor as we settle into a discussion of the fundamental components of



acting: objectives, obstacles, tactics, and subtext. Creating a character is about finding that person's humanity. One of the fundamentals for building a character is that he or she can never be labeled by the actor; there is no such thing as a hero or a villain, no good guys or bad guys, no criminals, saints, or damsels in distress. Regardless of what an audience may believe, an actor knows that the role she is playing is that of a human being doing the best she can to get what she wants from what she's facing in that moment. I don't try to disguise the fact that stepping into a role in this way is a microcosm of what it means to be a human being. We're all acting, pretty much all the time, I tell them.

In fact, I often use my role as a teacher to demonstrate objectives, obstacles, tactical adjustments, and subtext, even labeling them in the moment so they can see how my "performance" is adjusting to what they're giving me. I jog across the room as the students settle back onto the semi-circle of acting blocks. Some drag over chairs, and some just sit on the floor. I roll a white board over to the broken space in the circle and uncap a black marker. The white board was commandeered from the football team, which seems fitting since I often break into my best John Madden when writing on it, drawing some extraneous circles and arrows and shouting, "Boom!" just for the fun of it.

I write the word "objective" on the white board. I then ask the students, "If I'm playing the role of *teacher* right now, what is my objective? What am I trying to accomplish?"

"To get us to shut up!" Sydney offers.

"No, to *teach* us." Morgan declares proudly.

I slide-shuffle toward them and say, "You're both right. My overall objective is to teach you, but if I am to accomplish that objective, I need to overcome the obstacle

presented by your tendency—Bob Man, pay attention!—to get distracted, or to speak out of turn. So, my objective is always to get and hold your attention so I can move you toward understanding what I want you to learn for the day.” They break into applause and laughter at the serendipity of Robert’s distraction, and he turns sheepishly to me for help.

“Mr. G. What’d I do?!”

“You’re perfect, Robert. Don’t change, but stay with me here. If my objective is to get you to listen and the obstacle in my way is peoples’ tendency to get distracted, or bored, or just space off, what tactics am I going to use to overcome the obstacles?”

“It depends on the obstacle.” He says, knowing the insight of his answer.

“You’re exactly right. So what are my options? What tactics do I have at my disposal?” I shift my focus from Robert to scan the rest of the class.

Brooke raises her hand and says, “You could yell.”

I write that on the white board under the word “TACTICS,” to the left of the word “OBSTACLE,” that I’ve drawn a lumpy circle around to suggest a boulder.

“Good.” I write, ‘To Yell.’ Notice how it’s a verb? We always take action with our tactics, so we label them as verbs. What else?”

“You could ask us, or tell us to be quiet.” Ema says from just to my right.

“Good.” I write those as fast as I can: *To ask, to yell.*

“How do I decide which to use?”

They’re a little puzzled. Bob-Man says, “You just *do!*”

“Exactly, but why?”

“Uhhuhhh...” a collective uncertainty and the din begins to rise once again.

“I’m doing it right now. I have all of these tools at my disposal, to ask, to demand, to entertain, to condescend, to yell, to flatter, to insist. I try one, and if it works I move on to my next objective, which is what?”

“To teach us!” Ema says right on cue.

“Yes. So it’s a constant dance. I push forward toward my objective, I retreat to get your attention, I push forward, I retreat. I’m constantly reading and reacting to what I read in you, the person or people I’m speaking to. So who are *you* speaking to?”

They don’t make the connection. They don’t think they’re supposed to be speaking. Someone says feebly, “You?”

“No, I mean in your scenes.” I take two long strides toward him. “Who are you talking to in your scenes?”

“The other character.”

“Yes, good! And how do you know how to say the lines? What drives your approach to your communication: your language, your posture, your tone of voice?”

“Objectives and tactics,” comes Clare’s quiet but certain voice from the back.

“Yes. Excellent. So you read your scripts very carefully, looking for those clues we talked about with *Streetcar*, so you know exactly what your character wants, what he or she is trying to get from the scene, and what tactics he or she is employing—using—to get what he or she wants. What really makes it come alive is the dance. I can see that each of your characters wants something, and their dialogue creates a clash that pushes them to continually adjust their tactics in order to accomplish their objectives. It’s a battle, just like a football game. If I’m an audience member, I should never know who is

going to win the scene until the scene is over. That's what makes it come to life!" I'm nearing a crescendo now.

They seem to get it, but next comes the biggest challenge, convincing them to do the work necessary to make this theoretical stuff come to life. This is where I really have to hook them.

"So, what I want you to do is to spend a few minutes with the first page of your script. Identify one clear objective and the tactics you might use to accomplish that objective. Right now, I'm not so concerned about you being absolutely correct. We'll spend more time in the next few days analyzing your script. Just identify what you think your character wants, and then spend some time playing in the scene with your partner." I head back to the white board and double circle "Objectives" and "Tactics" to remind them of what they should be looking for. Then I write "JUST PAGE ONE!!!" because I don't want them to spread themselves thin before they understand the conflict."

"Remember, the biggest challenge you have to overcome as an actor is making your lines intuitive so that you can use the words as your tools, the vehicles that carry your tactics and your subtext, without having to try to remember what your words are. Thinking will kill your scene." The din begins to rise with the students as they decide it's time to get up and go to work. "Hey! I'm not done!" They stop moving and are quiet. "You must get to the point where you no longer have to think; the words are just there. This is a process, so just work on making progress. Just focus on the first line of your scene, then the first page, but don't take on too much at once. Identify your objective, and then try different tactics that are *reactions* to the tactics your scene partner gives you. Got it?" They nod as if to say, *yes, we get it already! Please stop talking now.* "Alright,

you have 20 minutes. Go to work.” The students head for their book bags to grab their scripts and spread out around the black box to find their partners. I make my way around the room, watching, listening, and asking questions as they read their lines to each other, slowly making them their own, and trying on various personas while they exchange dialogue. *This, I think, is what it’s all about.*

My classroom is a chorus of woven voices; they are confused, and proud, and humorous, and unsure, and inquisitive, as we work our way toward discoveries and a better understanding of the world and of each other. “[T]he classroom situation most provocative of thoughtfulness and critical consciousness is the one in which teachers and learners find themselves conducting a kind of collaborative search, each from her or his lived situation” (Green 23). All of these voices, of Scott and Lakota and Ema and Bobman and Haley and Max and Sarah, make a statement about the way they see the world, and we ponder it and rebut it and laugh at it and feel proud of it and we grow. Each of these students has a voice that I want each to feel capable of contributing, and we will come to a clearer conclusion than I ever could if I were simply offering my beliefs.

I seek to help nurture our students and to ground them in who they are, without demanding of them that they must be the best. The problem with a performance-based culture is that it inevitably devalues the human being, placing the emphasis on the achievement alone. Without the achievement, what is there? I deal with students every day who are terrified of not getting an “A”. They care very little about what we’re doing in class, except they get their work done promptly, and will do pretty much anything you

ask of them, with the tacit agreement that they'll get an "A" in the course. I make it my job to challenge them. I've had long and contentious conversations with parents who clearly value the grade more than the experience, and simply see the classes his or her students are taking as a means to an end. There appears to be a deep-seated fear of being average, and a Sisyphean need to be the best that won't allow these kids to take the time to evaluate what they actually enjoy or who they actually are.

Leadership in the classroom goes far beyond clearly conveying content or practicing skills with a student. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Mike Rose discusses the turning point in his education, when he went from struggling student to curious and confident reader as a result of the mentorship of a couple professors. "What mattered most ... were the relationships they established with me, the guidance they provided when I felt inadequate or threatened" (235-236). Teaching is a complex act that cannot be packaged, standardized, or reduced to a series of clearly delineated steps. Effective teaching is about the constant give and take of relationships.

Each member of a teacher's class, poor *or* advantaged, gives rise to endless decisions, day-to-day determinations about a child's reading and writing: decisions on how to tap strength, plumb confusion, foster growth. The richer your conception of learning and your understanding of its social and psychological dimensions, the more insightful and effective your judgments will be (Rose 236).

It is also true, however, that time must be allocated for teachers to be able to nurture such relationships. If, as a country, we continue to standardize curriculum and pedagogy through an increase in standardized tests while applying more pressure to improve test scores, even as class sizes increase, we will make the task ever harder for teachers.

Inevitably, this struggle trickles down to students. Standardization does not lend itself to the risk and vulnerability of humanized education.

In order to have any hope of a truly effective public education system in this country, we need a pedagogy that invites students to take part in the discourse, not one that threatens to punish them for failing. To do that we'll need a shift from the current standardized paradigm. As Rose argues, "we'll need a revised store of images of educational excellence, ones closer to egalitarian ideas—ones that embody the reward and turmoil of education in a democracy, that celebrate the plural, messy human reality of it" (238).

Deconstructing the artificial binaries established by our culture and perpetuated through education is necessary to humanize the classroom. By claiming my whole identity, I become free to model acceptance, inquiry, and dialogue, and to invite my students to open themselves to the same. Author and Vietnamese Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us that "the life of each one of us is connected with the life of those around us. If we know how to live in mindfulness, if we know how to preserve and care for our own mind and heart...our brothers and sisters will also know how to live in mindfulness" (60). By being mindful of each and every student I work with, while acknowledging life in all of its ambiguous complexity and wonder, I am free to relax and see where the classroom takes me.

The connections I create with students are a sort of redemption. They offer me something that, for whatever reason, I have rarely granted myself - the freedom to be myself in a community of people whom I urge to do the same. The redemption, though, is more than that. Most of my professional life outside the classroom has existed within

the confines of binary notions of success, failure, being good, or being bad, or making a tacit statement to others about what that means. On good days, when I'm interacting with students all of that goes away; there is nothing but the ideas, the student(s), and me. Not only is that all that matters, that is all that exists. This is the magic. The dualism still surfaces in most facets of my life. The source of the addiction persists; that is, the incessant emptiness, the quest for an often-elusive happiness, success, or satisfaction that is drowned out by the need to *do* more, to *be* more. The fear and shame that plagued me as a child lurk below the surface, some days deeper than others. I don't really know where it came from or how to stop it, though I do everything I can to keep putting one foot in front of the other, and I know that my choice not to medicate myself in the old ways means that life will never be as bad as it once was, and though I may feel lost and vulnerable at times, there is part of me that gets stronger. This is who I am.

In the relationships I build inside my classroom, though, I find happiness, where I derive meaning from what, in the circles of Alcoholics Anonymous, is known as a *power greater than myself*. The spirit of the classroom is an energy to be harnessed and ridden wherever it may go. Where that is can never be predicted, and it rarely goes where you would expect. Instead, in those moments when we're all together, maybe reading of Telemakhos standing at Odysseus' shoulder as the elder makes the suitors pay for the disrespect they have shown him, the collective energy coming from 32 14- and 15-year-olds is something roughly akin to that created in the theater when the audience and the performers are locked into the humanity imagined by the playwright. In these moments, I am a teacher, but that says very little. I am a friend; I am a nurturer; I am an entertainer; I am a lesson-planner; I am a writer, putting words to my craft in hopes that they will make



sense to budding creativity; I am the devil's advocate; I am a rhetorician unpacking the nuances of Socratic dialogue; I am an inspiration to young men who may think that stepping outside of expectations, or taking intellectual, academic, or social risks, is a bad thing and should be avoided, and to those young men who may feel the opposite; I am a leader who just as often follows my students to see where they take me.

When I was in ninth grade, we had an English bulldog named Cecil that I would occasionally take for a walk. I liked the time alone and found, especially on blustery autumn evenings when the sun was setting earlier, a deep but somehow comforting sense of melancholy, as Cecil and I slowly made our way south to the yet unfinished development over the hill from our house. When we'd gotten far enough into the undeveloped hills to be out of sight, we'd find a seat on a dirt pile next to an unfinished home and gaze over the hills at the horizon. It felt so sad, all that farmland that seemed so pristine, being graded and carved into yet more subdivisions. It seemed like the loss of something that I would never have back. Sometimes I'd have part of a joint rolled up in the corner of a plastic baggie or a bent Winston Light left over from the weekend, and I would sit and smoke, wondering why things happened the way they did and what was to come.

Twenty years later, I have a different dog. Like clockwork, Samantha and I go for a walk every night between seven and eight. I've been clean and sober for a long time now, almost as long as I'd been alive when Cecil and I used to take those walks. Sometimes when we're walking and the sun's going down, I'm overcome by that same

sense of melancholy. It's a sadness that I can't quite put my finger on, but is kind of beautiful, nevertheless. Sometimes the melancholy becomes a deep sense of loneliness, isolation, or fear and I catch myself wondering if maybe I could have done things differently. It's not quite regret, more like a sadness that cannot be understood. I catch my mind trying to pick it apart, to figure out where it comes from and how I can fix it. That's when I take a deep breath and just try to lean into it. If I can, I muster a smile and chalk it up to the *fundamental ambiguity of being human*. I smile at Sam, and we just keep on walking.

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