

## “Teaching the Lessons I’ve Learned”

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The longer I teach, the more I realize that students don’t only want to glean information from their teachers and professors; they want to learn from the wisdom and experience of their elders. Students of the traditional undergraduate age—approximately eighteen to twenty-two years old—are in the process of trying to “find” themselves and to decide upon the direction in which they will take their lives. Older students are often pursuing their studies because they are in their lives, looking to take their careers and lives into a new phase or focus. My students approach me for advice on their term papers, but even more often they approach me for advisement in choosing and shaping their course of study, and for insight into personal issues they may be experiencing. I direct them to the university’s Center for Personal Development, if their problems are serious and they should obviously consult a professional for guidance; however, I often feel that they have come to me for a reason, because they sense that I may have the experience and insight they need at this point in their lives—after all, I am (usually) an elder who has pursued extensive university-level study and have carved for myself, as they can see, a very agreeable career niche, which enables me to think, and to give and take ideas, for a living.

A couple of years ago, when I was asked to give a brief talk to students and fellow Saint Peter’s faculty and staff members at Campus Ministry’s Soup and Substance discussion series, I asked myself what I had to offer of real “substance.” I decided to make my talk personal for, like the students who come to me for advice, I have struggled with my sense of purpose. I took quite a long time to figure out an acceptable career course for myself and when I finally felt comfortable with my vocation, I realized that I had come to it through more of a meandering

evolution than by means of a concrete decision. In discussing my own existential “angst” and the life lessons I’ve learned, especially concerning my intellectual and artistic studies and the course of my career, I hope to be a better teacher to my students, on many levels. What follows is the essay I composed in response to my invitation to Campus Ministry, which I (rather long-windedly) entitled “‘Why Bother? A Meditation on Purpose’ Or, ‘Why I Teach Literature’ (An Essay for Campus Ministry’s ‘Soup and Substance’ Discussion Series)”:

I have often had my doubts about what I do for a living, which is teaching literature. If it is true, as Shakespeare asserts,

All the world’s a stage,

And all the men and women merely players:

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts (*As You Like It* 2.7),

then, like any good actor, I must ask myself the question “What is my motivation” for doing what I do, at any stage of my life? Why have I chosen the field in which I currently work: do I have a great affinity for the work I do; did I feel somehow compelled or obligated to enter this profession; am I trying to prove something to myself or to others; or am I truly following a call which makes me feel like a productive member of society? Am I fully utilizing my talents? Why am I bothering to do what I do—is it simply for a paycheck, or for a greater, meaningful payoff, both for myself and for others?

I love to read and experience great literary works and to examine them closely, considering the historical context in which they were written, including the authors’ influences

and assumptions. I love to turn my students on to this process and to hear what they have to say when they begin flexing their own analytical muscles. I love to bring the word to life, studying and creating both music and drama. This is living art, and it speaks to our souls. Over the years I've had to get back to this realization, for it was lost somewhere in graduate school and remained clouded in my early career.

I fell out of love with literature when immersed in the world of literary criticism, composing my dissertation and attending academic conferences. While I recognize the value of subjecting any material one considers to rigorous intellectual scrutiny, I also find that many in “the profession” (a pretentious name which some academics use to glorify their line of work, as if there is no other career worthy of the name) take themselves too seriously, identifying solely with their intellects. There is some irony here, as far as literary scholars are concerned, for the subject they study is emotional and often mystical in nature: from *Macbeth's* “weird sisters” to the mythological visions of William Blake, Walt Whitman’s mystical raptures on the unity of human experience, Edgar Allan Poe’s forays into the dark mysteries of the psyche, and the love sonnets of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. I spun my intellectual wheels for years, considering the anti-feminist implications of Shakespeare’s early history plays; this was quite interesting, on an intellectual level, but over time I wound up feeling dried up and dead inside. Why had I begun reading and loving this material in the first place? This is what I had to ask myself.

One day in 1996, while wandering amid the stacks in New York University’s Bobst Library, I recalled a short work by Walt Whitman, a poet and Civil War journalist who has always been dear to my heart. The original poem, “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” reads as follows:

When I heard the learn'd astronomer;  
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;  
 When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them;  
 When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much applause in  
     the lecture-room,  
 How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;  
 Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,  
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
 Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

Whitman desired to bypass the pitfalls of academic study: its tendency to sometimes lose the forest for the trees of categorization and precision, the egotism and self-congratulation with which academics sometimes magnify the importance of their endeavors and prop their sense of self worth. As he expresses in much of his other poetry, Whitman wanted to get back to the original source of inspiration and to eschew differentiation, classification, élitism. As a grad student, I responded to this desire on a deep level and wrote:

About Literature, For Whitman

(Composed after "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer")

When I read the learn'd theoretician,  
 When I had found her book, 'mid thousands ranged in columns before me,  
 When I was led along an intricate path of winding logic and words created for the  
     moment,

When I reading realized how abstract and removed from my heart was this  
 argument,

How soon on this account I felt my spirits sink,  
 Till reaching for some friendly leaves of simple verse,  
 I read of living emotion, and from time to time,  
 Paused to feel my pulsing heart leap in reply.

Of course I do find value in academic endeavors; however, while we live in a culture which affords prestige (if not great monetary rewards) to intellectual pursuits, we tend to take for granted those who work with their hands. Whitman admiringly illustrated all professions in his *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poems which puts forth a democratic vision of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America:

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear;  
 Those of mechanics—each one singing his, as it should be, blithe and strong;  
 The carpenter singing his, as he measures his plank or beam,  
 The mason singing his, as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work;  
 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat—the deckhand singing on  
 the steamboat deck;  
 The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench—the hatter singing as he stands;  
 The wood-cutter's song—the ploughboy's, on his way in the morning, or at the  
 noon intermission, or at sundown;  
 The delicious singing of the mother—or of the young wife at work—or of the girl  
 sewing or washing—Each singing what belongs to her, and to none else;

The day what belongs to the day—At night, the party of young fellows, robust,  
friendly,

Singing, with open mouths, their strong melodious songs.

I often consider how the person who can fix my car and build me a house is much more useful to society than I am, or so I sometimes think. I believe that we need to value and foster all kinds of intelligence, whether one excels in creating a business, building cars, raising animals, growing corn, sailing boats, healing the sick, or inspiring those who feel spiritually lost—every endeavor has its place and use. In order to feel good about what I do, I need to ask myself not only what it is about the study of literature which inspires me personally, but what can I do within my profession which is useful to society?

Professors of literature can help their students learn to express themselves more effectively in writing and to develop their analytical skills, which are useful in all areas of life. We can incorporate the study of history and other disciplines into our analysis of literature, expanding our students' knowledge base in many directions. However, there are also less tangible applications for the study of literature. Great literature speaks to the experiences of all humanity, whether we are professional intellectuals, businesspeople, mechanics, farmers, sailors, doctors, ministers. Through great fiction, drama and poetry we consider what it is to be human—how we live and how we may understand and help each other—and also what might exist beyond this world. Eric Clapton once sang, "It's in the way that you use it": accordingly, the study of literature can be used to sharpen our minds, but also to open them and to open our hearts as well. When I consider my "profession" in this light, I no longer question the value of what I do.