

October, 1998 - Kathleen Monahan, English

For eight years, I taught English literature and composition at Saint Peter's Newark airport campus. My students were Port Authority employees - police officers, mechanics, bridgepainters - trying to wedge an education into a life criss-crossed by split shifts, swing shifts, and double overtime.

On the first evening of one *Survey of English Literature* class, Dominic introduced himself, adding by way of further identification, "I was never any good at English, and I hate poems." He didn't intend to be hostile; he was just an honest man who didn't want me to have any illusions about him. He trudged dutifully through the early assignments, perking up briefly at Chaucer's "Miller's Tale." For the most part, however, he demonstrated the enthusiasm of one who has been told to empty a truckload of bricks one at a time.

On our third night of class, we were working our way through "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and had reached the section of the poem in which the luckless sailor finds himself floating through a sea of ice.

"He's right, you know," said Dominic suddenly.

"Excuse me?"

"About the icebergs," he said. "Most people think they're white, but they're green. Coleridge is right."

Dominic then explained that, while in the Navy, he had been assigned to one of the ice ships that patrol the North Atlantic, blowing up icebergs before they drift into the sea lanes. He had brought to this poem his years as a sailor, his knowledge of the sea, his memory of icebergs. The poem spoke to him in a more direct way than it ever had to me, and I found his experience remarkable. Meanwhile, Dominic was forcibly impressed by the truth he had found in an eighteenth-century poet. If Coleridge had been right about the icebergs, what else might he know?

This incident is memorable to me for several reasons. First, I hope to do many more things in life, but I think it fair to say I will probably never crawl around on an iceberg, and I am, therefore, intrigued by the reports of those who have. Secondly, and more importantly, this exchange demonstrated to me again the value of recognizing what my students know. As teachers, we are trained to determine what our students do not know. A range of diagnostic tools, both formal and informal, allows us to maximize our efficiency by pinpointing weaknesses in skills and gaps in understanding. But the diagnostic process, however necessary, is often discouraging to teacher and student alike. Dominic had, in fact, executed a pre-emptive strike by presenting himself as a poetry-hater. What he discovered in reading Coleridge was the value of his own

experience and the mysterious ways in which it could connect him to another man in a distant place and time.

William Carlos Williams once noted that the movement in poetry is always "from the local to the universal, as the river to the sea." He was describing the process of writing poetry, but I believe that his observation applies equally well to the reading of literature and perhaps to the learning process as well. When we move from our own experience to that of others, we are prepared to learn. When we recognize the value of the knowledge we have, we are inspired to acquire more. When we find in the locality of self the need or desire for the universal, education takes place.

I do not have a system for discovering or forging connections between what my students know and what I plan to teach them, for the range of experiences, memories, and ideas they bring to class is impossibly broad. Nor do I have a lesson plan that will unfailingly produce this kind of epiphany, for such a strategy would preclude the sense of serendipity that characterizes the discovery. I am conscious, too, of the pitfalls present in this approach-trivializing material, overstating similarities, emphasizing content at the expense of form. However, I am grateful for the occasional reminder that much of what I want my students to know is planted firmly in the human experience. The lessons of art, philosophy, literature and history are not simply quaint accounts "of cabbages and kings." These disciplines live because they speak to us, sometimes in new and unexpected ways of things we know of love and disappointment, confusion and grief. And, for one not so ancient mariner, green icebergs floating in a sunless sea.