

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

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"Remember the Alamo"

When I decided to go into teaching, the biggest fear I had was that I wouldn't be ready to manage a room full of students. A course in classroom observation (where I went out and observed a teacher in action and make note of techniques, problems, and methods of classroom management) was the only field experience I was going to have before my semester of student teaching. I wasn't sure that this would be enough, so I decided to log some hours as a volunteer teacher's aid at the local junior high school. What followed was indeed an epiphany in my fledgling teaching career.

"REALLY?" HE SAID, "AS A VOLUNTEER?"

The look of pleasant surprise did a little dance and turned into a full-blown smile. I had checked out with the Education Dept. at school and was a real live volunteer come knocking on his door. The delight that my offer had elicited from the language arts department had become his delight too; as the Principal of the Jr. High, Mr. Forrest realized that happy teachers were, well, happy teachers, and you could never have too many!

I had begun to feel like one of George Bush's "thousand points of light", going forth to change a nation. In reality I was just trying to get as much classroom experience as possible prior to student teaching. Working as a teacher's aid a full day a week in addition to my course in classroom observation was going to do me a world of good in getting prepared to face a class full of students on my own. I figured that it wouldn't look bad on my resume either.

The following Friday was my first day, and when I arrived, Mr. Forrest led me to the teacher's lounge. There I met the members of the faculty with whom I would be working: an interesting mix of experienced, albeit somewhat jaded teachers, and those bright, younger faces that had yet to have their idealism tempered by reality. I nodded and smiled as the older teachers dispensed pearls of wisdom, but in my mind I was trying to predict which ones were near retirement or burn out, and if their leaving would coincide with the time that I would receive my certification.

I was happy to learn that I wasn't just going to be someone to pass out papers and help baby-sit. I was actually going to be working with some of these kids. In some classes I'd be in the writing lab with a group of students, helping them with the mechanics of writing and rounding off the rough edges on the final drafts of assignments. In others, I would be working with smaller groups of students, or one on one with those who needed extra attention. Or, as I was to find out, students that had just started to grate on the teacher's nerves a bit too much.

The bell rang that signaled the change of classes, and I could feel the building come to life as hundreds of students burst from classroom doors like the waters of a flash flood, the corridor an aqueduct channeling the human flow to its destinations. I watched this unlimited energy of youth sweeping away all before it, only to disappear a few minutes later at the

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

sound of the next bell, leaving behind only a few swirling papers and a lone pencil slowly rolling to a stop. I almost expected to see a few survivors as they desperately clung to hand railings or locker doors. The image was fleeting, but as I entered the classroom I imagined that I could hear the gurgling sound that the last bit of water makes as it goes down a drain.

The kids came to a semblance of order when the teacher walked into the room. There was the usual amount of talking that died down once Mrs. Garabedian turned the lights on and off in order to get their attention. She made mention of the previous night's homework and the majority of kids quickly produced their finished assignments. The handful of students who replied "I forgot" or "I didn't hear" were taken in stride; these cases of memory loss and selective deafness were repeat offenders. Mrs. Garabedian gathered up those students much as a mother bird would gather up her young. That is if her young had been in the nest too long, expressing no interest in learning how to fly on their own.

She introduced me to them and said, "Mr. V. will accompany you to the library and you can work on the assignment there." She gave me a smile that said "Mi problema es su problema..."

Seeing as how I didn't know where the library was, I followed behind my new charges. I found myself wondering how they managed to avoid tripping on their clunky, untied sneakers, or how their incredibly baggy pants managed to not fall all the way down to their ankles. I heard an echo in my mind of my father saying something about

"those stupid looking bell bottoms and that damn long hair."

I smiled as I remembered what it was like to be that age, of the untapped enthusiasm that lay beneath the surface. I realized that this just might turn out to be fun.

Minutes later, I found myself sitting at a table in the library with six, eighth-graders.

"Well, let's get to it!" I said in an upbeat tone of voice, "What was the assignment that you were supposed to do?"

"Find ten interesting facts about the poet we're studying this week," answered James, who looked as if he would have trouble finding ten interesting facts about anything.

"Who is it?" I asked.

As a group, they mumbled, "Emily Dickinson."

I stood, stroking my goatee as if about to offer some sage advice, all the while thinking, "C'mon Bill, you've got the degree in English, you've read Dickinson, help these kids out!"

"O-o-okay," I said slowly, as the fog of doubt thickened. Then, with all the confidence of someone who hasn't read Dickinson in twelve years, I said, "Let's try the encyclopedia!"

Now, armed with various editions of volume A through D, we descended on our table and began the tedious task of research.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

"This is easy!" said Tony ;(if it's easy, it's for him.)

"Oh really? Then why didn't you do it last night?" I asked.

"Hey, if I did it last night I wouldn't be here with a free period!"

Much like an electrical current, I was to find that you could always count on Tony for a shock, and for him to take the path of least resistance.

"Dude," I said to him, "nothing is free. Keep writing."

It all turned into a group effort that actually produced results - and more than a bit of noise. Not wanting to be a wet blanket on this sudden thirst for knowledge, I knew then would be an opportune time for me to go and introduce myself to the librarian. After a minute or two of running interference for them, I noticed that the noise at the table has died down. I went back and checked on the progress of the group. They all had their facts (copied word for word out of the books), but after learning that Dickinson always wore white ("weird but kinda cool" to them) and that she lived alone and had a preoccupation with death, ("Didn't they have counselors back then?" asked Ben), the interest in Emily had waned. They had slaked their thirsts, only to find all that remained in the cup was the ice. There had to be something else that was interesting, something that would break the monotony of names and dates. And then it came to mind. A fact that I had learned, 'lo those many years ago, as an undergraduate. Something that wasn't in any of those dry old books of poetry.

"All right! I just remembered something! Here is some information that no one else is going to have! Add a fact number *eleven* to your paper." I felt so proud of myself that my ego was about to achieve lift off!

"For number eleven, write down that you can sing much of her poetry to the tune of 'The Yellow Rose of Texas!'"

The old newsreel showing the fiery crash of the Hindenberg was playing before my eyes, as there was absolutely no hint of recognition in any of their faces.

"Is that, like, a song?" asked Bobby.

"Yes!" I said enthusiastically, "The Yellow Rose of Texas?" I ask them. "You know, Texas, big state, we sort of stole it from Mexico?"

"Stole it from Mexico? What do you mean? ," asked Ray, his eyes lighting up at the mention of possible larceny.

"Yes, stole it from Mexico. Well, not really stole it, but you know about the Alamo, right?"

"Some kinda fort?" asked Ray.

"Close!" I answer quickly, "Back then, Texas was a part of Mexico. It was so nice that Americans moved into the neighborhood, fixed it up, and decided to stay. That was when they told the Mexican Army that they liked Texas and thought they were going to be taking it over, and that they didn't need the army around anymore."

"Now considering that there were only a couple of hundred 'Texicans' as they liked to call themselves, and there were a couple of thousand troops of the Mexican army against them, you can see how the Mexican

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

general Santa Anna might not have taken the Texicans seriously. He told them to get out and they told him in no uncertain terms to shove it."

It was at this point that I realized that I had them! They were listening to me and were interested!

I continued, "Yeah, Santa Anna though he was going to walk right in there and kick the troublemakers out. But the Texicans didn't like the idea of anybody ordering them off of their new turf. It was like they found a great new parking lot to skateboard in and someone had called the police! They stood right up to Santa Anna and told him they weren't leaving. So anyway, no matter how hard the troops tried, they couldn't overrun the Alamo, which was an old mission church in which the Texicans had made their headquarters. The Texicans fought the Mexicans for almost two whole weeks before the army was able to defeat them."

"Cool." (A good response.)

"Those guys kicked some Mexican butt, huh Mr. V?"

"Well, yes, but they did all get killed in the end."

"Yeah, but going out fighting!" Ray exclaimed, "So what's it got to do with that song?"

"Well," I said, "the battle of the Alamo is one of the reasons people from Texas are real proud of their state. You don't say bad things about Texas in front of someone from Texas, unless you're looking for trouble. The song is kind of saying that Texan women are babes and there are no finer babes than Texan babes."

Right there were the ingredients to capture the attention of five eighth grade boys: babes, fighting, and standing up to authority.

After talking Mrs. Garabedian into giving an extension on the assignment on the grounds that we were making some cross-content area connections, (poetry, history, music, it all sounded good to me,) we assembled after school in the cafeteria. After whistling the tune a few times, I had the kids try it. Bobby and Carl didn't know how to whistle, so we shifted to a hummed version. When asked what the words to the song were, I said it wasn't important, that Emily Dickinson was going to provide the words. And besides, I couldn't quite remember them. It took almost an hour, but at the end, we were all humming the same tune.

The poem that they chose was "Because I Could Not Stop for Death..." A perfect example.

Monday wasn't my day to be at the Jr. High, but I hurried over after my morning classes. I didn't want to miss the finished version of the process that I had begun. I got there just before my "Texicans" were about to begin their presentation. They were in the front of the room exchanging the glances and small talk that only conspirators can share. A secret was a secret and they hadn't let anyone in on what was going to happen. There was energy in the air that seemed to grow, like the anticipation that grows as a diver slowly climbs the ladder to the high platform.

There they were, approaching the diving board, taking a slow, deep breath that seemed to suck all the air out of the room. Then they hesitated,

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

looked at each other and froze. Who was going to go first? There were five of them and the other twelve students were waiting and watching, not knowing what to expect. They didn't exhale, the moment suspended in time. They looked around unsure of what to do, and then spotted me. I took a half step forward and loudly whispered, "Remember the Alamo."

In that moment a light went on in Tony's eyes, and in a voice that contained none of his usual cockiness, he started in:

*"Because I could not stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me-"*

*Bobby and Ben joined in on the next lines:
"The Carriage held but just ourselves-
And Immortality."*

*Then the rest sang out:
"We slowly drove-He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For His Civility-..."*

And so it went for the whole poem. If you doubt this, sing it yourself. It works. What also works is sometimes trying the unconventional when it comes to kids these days. Who would have thought that students with such uninspiring track records would get so "into" it? Not only did they get an introduction to Emily Dickinson, and a taste of American History, but they had fun. I'm not kidding myself into thinking that this one experience will turn these kids around, but I would like to think that they got something useful out of this exercise. I know that I did. I know that every day can't be a mark in the plus column. There will be off times, times when having to pull interest from them will be like extracting wisdom teeth, but I think back to the day when I first followed them to the library, remembering what it was like to be their age, of the untapped enthusiasm. I had been right. This could be fun.