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The Last Page: The Joys of Lives Well Lived

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The Joys of Lives Well Lived

A little while ago I received a Facebook message from a former student who was returning to Maine to visit family (all the way from Finland), and she wanted to know if she could show me some poems over coffee. Last week another former student wrote to tell me that her father, whom I’d known and liked, had passed away. In the spring two students who thought they finally had completed book manuscripts asked if I’d critique their work. Another wanted a Guggenheim recommendation, still two more asked for book blurbs. All of their letters were sprinkled with news. Most wanted to share their successes and frustrations, to send news of their families or their jobs, to complain about politics or the Red Sox. A fair number expressed curiosity about me and life at Colby.

I correspond, sporadically, with 40 or 50 former students, some who became writers and many who did not, but I’m nourished by all of their friendships. After all, we’d spent considerable time and energy with each other in class, on papers, in conference, and occasionally, late in their undergraduate life, over beers. Though those relationships are well-boundaried—no students should ever have to worry about their teachers—why should that reciprocally earned respect, curiosity, and affection disappear arbitrarily at graduation? Such sustained friendships are one of the pleasures of teaching, but teaching creative writing provides an occasion, almost by necessity, for knowing what students think and feel. Poems and stories are at least obliquely personal; good students will inevitably write about what matters to them. Most often behind their desire to write is a serious quest for meaning. I take that responsibility seriously. Never do I want to forget that it takes courage and trust to write, to risk being known and judged. A good writing workshop is not a support group: it’s a place to learn craft and discourse, to accept constructive criticism, to develop an individuated imagination, and to share, first and foremost, a faith in correspondence: the power of language to describe and decipher, to move and to change us.

As a young writer and teacher I was so passionate about writing and so grateful for how my life had been changed by it, I preached that it takes courage and trust to write. To sustain a commitment to an enlivening passion—indeed a passion that’s larger than the self—I blush at the predictable young man’s absolutes. I do still believe, though, that there’s something about the process of writing that encourages a capacity for human connection and intimacy. Whether writing or not, most of the students with whom I have maintained a connection have taken something of what they’ve learned from what writing demands of them (whether from me or others) and applied those skills to their lives.

An artist does have to consider what matters; he or she must challenge convention and received thought to avoid cliché, must remain undefended, open to both suffering and pleasure. He or she must temper his or her own ego need for recognition with a higher ambition for better and more ambitious work (you don’t get love from writing; you need a real live person for that). To sustain a commitment over time, writers must be continually willing to risk failure and rejection. The artist dwells in the senses, forges a truth that’s particular and experienced. Writing’s not simply a process of self-discovery: it demands attention to others, to what happens to those who live in the world, those who suffer injustices or who navigate with some consciousness their privilege and good fortune.

Writers are always deciphering gestures and expressions, the history of deprivations and joys. That’s called breadth of vision. In other words, I thought—and still think—that writing offers the opportunity to develop trust, character, and compassion. Of course that emotional knowledge has to be applied and tempered by an acceptance of human frailty. Now, of course, having taught many years, having been a parent, I know you don’t have to be a writer to be attentive and compassionate; as Whitman urged in Song of Myself, no one can travel the road for anyone else. I carry many of these values into my literature classes and independent studies now. What a lifetime of being an artist has taught me is to be curious about the souls of others, to listen well, and, in an avuncular way, take joy as these former students grow into themselves. I’ve had such wonderful students, and they’re wonderful to come back to me. Sometimes when I travel to give poetry readings in different cities I see them in the audience: we go out for drinks. There’s very little nostalgia about it. I have an image in my mind now of two former Colby students who married and recently had a baby and drove up to see me: there we all were, sitting in my dining room, talking seriously and playfully while little Winnie was oohing and ah-ing, crying and sleeping. I don’t take or deserve any credit for my students’ developing talents, but because we seem to value authenticity in discussing our anxieties and joys, our complex relationship to the world, we become vitalized and known: we can take each other in.

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