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FROM TEACHERS COMES THE GIFT OF TEACHING WRITING—AND WRITERS

BY ELISABETH STOKES

American Lit. Honors, Lathrop High School, Fairbanks, Alaska, Fall, 1987: our teacher, John Selle, acts out the “gazing grain” in Emily Dickinson’s *“Because I could not stop for Death.”* He bends his knees slightly, holding them together as if he is about to slalom between our desks, and, motionless, stares off into the horizon at the back of the classroom for several quiet seconds.

I loved it, and I wasn’t alone. We all—conservative gun-toting military brat twins, a girl who was pregnant, and a saxophonist who would later play in the Mighty Mighty Bosstones—begged Mr. Selle to do it every day after that. He, wisely, obliged only occasionally, doling the performance out like candy in exchange for our good behavior.

I was a junior; as a sophomore, I’d survived Analysis of Literature, taught by Susan Stitham, the department chair; she was brilliant, hilarious, and didn’t mess around.



In between Analysis and Ms. Stitham's A.P. English class my senior year, there were two other mountains to climb: this American Literature class and B.J. Craig's A.P. Composition. Mr. Selle had what I understand now as the passionate Dumbledorean belief that "words are our most inexhaustible source of magic." Mrs. Craig was formidable, all business, and instilled in me a deep respect for deadlines: when I learned in college that people routinely asked for "extensions" on essays, I was offended by the very idea, and I almost never allow them as a professor.

I've been teaching first-year writing for more than 20 years now, 17 of them at Colby. My calling began to surface in college when people started coming to me with papers they were writing. Helping them stirred memories of the excitement I used to feel after stopping by Mr. Selle's classroom while working on an essay he'd assigned. I would explain my dilemma, walking him through what I'd been thinking. He would listen, ask me a question or two, and off I'd go, scribbling distractedly, returning only when I'd spent that fuel. I became addicted to the moment when my muddled thoughts suddenly cleared, when I saw what I hadn't been able to before; I would go chasing after it like it was a drug. I didn't know it then, but I had discovered the joys, and aching frustrations, of being a writer. And learning that I could help other people write let me discover the joys, and yes, sometimes aching frustrations, of being a teacher.

Because of my high school English teachers, I focus on teaching writers rather than on teaching writing. My teachers shaped my sense of what teaching and learning can be. From them I learned that a piece of writing in itself is insignificant; a self-supporting thinker, writer, person—that's the goal.

A few years ago, a student came by my office troubled by an essay revision he was working on. He could sense what he wanted to say; he could feel where the argument needed to go, but it was, for the moment, just beyond him. I listened, asking questions, knowing what he was looking for, but also

knowing that the discovery needed to be his. I sat back in my chair, waiting, watching him struggle. He was coiled, gripping his head with one hand, pencil held tightly in the other. And then it came: he started, his eyes wide. He looked up at me as though I had revealed the secret of the universe, which, in a way, by saying almost nothing, I had. He threw his things in his backpack and ran off to write down all that was coming clear in his mind. I was again a vessel for what had come to me through my three teachers, for what, perhaps someday, would flow through this student. I could see myself in him; I could see all of us who have felt the connection that happens when words and ideas come together, when for a moment, it feels as though you can make sense of anything.

These moments are all both bitter and sweet; it was Emily Dickinson's "gazing grain" that first helped me understand what teaching, and life, can be. But as soon as I had the capacity to more fully understand these things, I also gained, necessarily, an awareness of their end: I became deeply conscious of the arc of one's teaching life, of the arc of one's life in general. I cannot think of Mr. Selle, his knees softly bent, his gentle eyes fixed over our shoulders, without a mournful pang in my heart for decades gone by and lessons only now being understood. The enormity of what my teachers taught me is perhaps revealed only in proportion to what I am able to pass along.

The best teachers go ahead, turn, and beckon us forward, help us open our eyes to the beautiful, difficult truths about what it means to be alive, and teach us how to share those truths if we can. Grasp the importance of what books can teach you, they seemed to say, but bigger still is what teaching can teach you. I'm still learning.

Visiting Assistant Professor of English Elisabeth Stokes has taught at Colby since 2001. Her essay, "Reaping What Rape Culture Sows," is included in the anthology Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture, edited by Roxane Gay (P. 30).