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Seeking

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> It is after all so easy to shatter a story. To break a chain of thought. To ruin a fragment of a dream being carried around carefully like a piece of porcelain. To let it be, to travel with it . . . is much the harder thing to do.
>
> ~Arundhati Roy (1997: *The God of Small Things*)

Phase One: Stir up the Hornet's Nest

Why do we/I teach? I have no good answer to this question. For some, teaching is a powerful compulsion, often likened to an addiction or religious calling among those who have been "bitten" or "called." Yet, many professional educators recognize to some extent the precarious dance we engage in. How to remain open, reflexive to the shifting needs of our students? How to avoid dominance/abuse of our power? How to attempt, albeit imperfectly, to create a classroom that diverges from a paradigm of imperialism to one of social justice?[1]

Truth be told, I often find my position as an instructor to be lonely, frustrating, oppressive, and even painful. I wonder why I'm here. I wonder why I continue to engage in acts that make me feel complicit, some days, in the system of power inequality that characterizes much of higher education, particularly my own little corner of the pedagogical landscape, teaching at a small community college in upstate New York. Lately, I've been drifting closer and closer to just giving up on education altogether, retreating back to my farm, and closing the doors on the outside world. I am so tired. My daily task is to witness disenfranchised, exhausted, unhappy people suffer, struggle, and, too often, ultimately give up. It hurts. I hurt.

Once upon a time, I was a believer. I was an ardent product of my own Liberal Arts education, eager to pass my own values, interests, insights on to others. My motives, I suppose, were well intentioned. Social justice and global citizenship are (or perhaps, were), to my mind, integral parts of the aim of Liberal Arts education, defined by the Association of American

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[1] Naeem Inayatullah, interview with Tamara Isak, *This Rhetorical Life*, podcast audio, November 15, 2013, http://thisrhetoricallife.syr.edu/episode-15-the-politics-of-pedagogy-with-naeem-inayatullah/

Colleges and Universities as "an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with a broad knowledge of the wider world . . . A liberal education helps students develop a sense of social responsibility."[2] It seemed like a valid claim to me; hadn't my own education given me those things? Wouldn't it follow, then, that I could pass the same things on to others?

I am not, I think, a total heretic in my field. I still see the value of empowering individuals, of striving towards the stated mission of a Liberal Arts education. I wonder, though, if such a thing is possible. Asked to define my own pedagogy or my students' work in the context of "a broad knowledge of the wider world", I am stymied. What do we have to say about the wider world, complexity, or social responsibility?

I could speak to absence, I suppose. The absolute absence of anything remotely resembling interest in or ability to think about the world in global terms (or regional terms, or even terms relating to those very subtly different than oneself). My students aren't good enough to go to real college. They aren't even good enough to take a real English class. Stuck at a small regional community college, stuck in some lame, formulaic remedial class, writing paragraphs about how to make a piece of toast. Yeah, we're about as far from those kinds of deep, big picture issues as a body can get.

Talk about resistance. They don't just resist my enthusiasm (obnoxious, effusive goodwill, to be more accurate). They don't resist some deep pedagogical or ideological agenda that I've laid out for them. Ha. As if. They resist success. They resist entertaining even the faint hope that they might be worthwhile human beings, have something meaningful to say. They fiercely, adamantly resist my encouragement, my faith in them, because they have to. What would happen if they actually believed me, just a teeny bit, for these fifteen weeks? They would move on, and some other teacher would go right back to reinforcing their academic labels as worthless and stupid and wrong. Sooner or later, *someone* in their lives (usually, lots of someones, and not just at school) tells them they have failed, are failing, and will continue to fail. They are Bad. Always. Bad at English. Bad at Reading. Bad at Math. Bad at College. Bad at Life. More than anything else, they resist success. It would feel too much like having hope.

Naomi[3] is beautiful, radiant, confident, a born leader. She is charisma, kindness, and sassy Truth, all rolled into one. On the second day of class, we are each telling one thing about ourselves that not everyone could guess. She says, "My mom is so mad at me for coming to college. She keeps calling me up, saying, 'Naomi, you better quit right now. Give them books back before you have to pay for them. It's bad when you fail all them classes, gotta pay all that money back.'"

[2] Association of American Colleges and Universities, "What is a 21st Century Education," *AAC&U*, accessed December 11, 2014. https://www.aacu.org/leap/what-is-a-liberal-education

[3] All names have been changed in order to protect privacy.

Later, Tara speaks up: “I’ve had cancer for 11 years, but they can’t remove it because I’m a severe hemophiliac. I’ve been doing chemo for 11 years. Sometimes I don’t know how I keep going.”

Naomi looks all around the room. She makes eye contact with everyone, nods, speaks for the group as she affirms Tara’s struggle. “Look how strong you are. You’re here, aren’t you?”

Naomi disappears in week four. I don’t know where she went. Once students drop my class, I’m locked out of their accounts. I can’t look up Naomi’s personal information, track her down, tell her to come back. I Facebook stalk her, without success. (Is this unethical? Maybe. I do it anyways.) I keep hoping she’ll be back. Someday.

Amy is shy, diffident, so thin it hurts to look at her. She covers her mouth with her hand when she smiles. In class, she tells us that her burden, the obstacle to college success she faces, is fear for her boyfriend, who is facing a possible prison sentence. Privately, she tells me that actually she *and* her boyfriend face indictment. In the ensuing weeks, her attendance slows and then trickles to a stop. Silence. She no longer answers my texts. I wonder where she is. I hope she is okay.

Cruz seems much, much younger than nineteen to me. He misses Jersey. His mother calls often, and he always steps out to take her calls, throwing me an apologetic glance as he walks out the door, mumbling, “Sí, mami. Sí,” over and over into the phone. He tells me that upstate New York is too cold, too quiet, too white. He misses brown people. Two weeks before the end of the semester, he announces that he has joined the Army. Infantry. He is leaving the next day. His classes, his GPA, can go to hell. These are his exact words. I wonder, after a semester spent pushing him to clarify his meanings, if this is proof that he has finally mastered this task.

After boot camp, he is deployed to Afghanistan, to keep America safe. This one, he does not disappear entirely. I can follow him on social media, read his posts, but he is gone. Gone from college, gone from a world of inquiry, gone from thought to deed. I can’t believe that his time in college has prepared him “to deal with complexity, diversity, and change.” And I’m certain that we have not provided him with “a broad knowledge of the wider world.” I grieve the wounds he is going to receive, going to inflict.

So, tell me: what have I learned about the wider world, about global citizenship, about social justice from my students? Most simply, that students who are homeless, students with no food, students who just violated parole, students who have failed classes over and over again, students with no hope, do not care about the wider world. They don’t even care about their own country except insofar as it directly impacts their life.

I do not mean this to be a dodge. I’m not trying to avoid the obvious or beg the question here. Yes, that does create an opportunity. A closed door has the potential to open. Everyone has the potential to *think*, to examine, to find hope, to find meaning, in their own way. But, frankly, if I have a part to play in that process, I don’t know what it is. I don’t know how to begin.

Phase Two: Evading the Pedagogy Police:

Teaching remedial students is a choice I make readily. I love the people who walk through my door each semester. I love their persistence and wisdom and the breadth of their collective experiences. I tell them often that they are the hardest working college students on the planet: juggling work and family and myriad complex challenges in addition to their course work. I often leave my class profoundly moved by their lives, their stories, their insights. Yet, I dread the practice of teaching these courses. I loathe the stock assignments handed down from administrators. I am furious with the assumption that these students are not to be trusted with "college level" tasks, that they should be handed templates appropriated from middle and high school curriculums, force-fed information, and then required to dutifully copy the model provided. There is no room for growth, for movement, for agency (for myself or my students).

The choices I face, though, seem impossible. Rebel? Radical pedagogy is not welcomed in remedial education. There is no safety net for me. I am an at will employee of the college. I could be let go at any time. Conform? Compromise my values, knowing full well that this in turn cheats my students of an opportunity to engage meaningfully with pressing issues that confront us all.

I search for a place in between, often blindly, with many missteps, sometimes guided by a hope that grows thin and weary, but searching, nonetheless.

Tuck and roll. This is how my pedagogy develops. I sign up for every blessed committee known to man. My schedule morphs in bizarre quantum folds, and I find myself buzzing from place to place, making sure that everyone, everywhere on this campus knows that I am here, I am involved, I am engaged. Face time is important. It facilitates the illusion that I am a Good Teacher, a Good Employee, a Respectable Representative of Our College.

I have a curriculum to follow. I'm contractually obligated to shepherd minds into producing four neat essays, with pre-approved topics. Two summaries, also with pre-approved topics. How to diverge? And where? And when?

I lay plans in secret. How to generate a thing that, on the surface, *resembles* the remedial requirements I am contractually bound to fulfill, without actually being anything like those formulaic, fill-in-the-blank assignments at all?

I survey the terrain, consider my options, plan, plot, connive.

"Do more with less" is our College mantra these days. Less money, less staff, less students. Public decision makers historically view remedial services as "duplicative, costly, and unworthy of a place in college," despite the role they play in maintaining democratic access to higher education.[4] And, while I agree that remedial education is a deeply imperfect system, this criticism leaves me angry. I am angry about a new, more insidious version of higher education segregated by social class, if not by race, although we all know they are often inextricably

[4] Robert McCabe and Phillip Day, *Developmental Education: A Twenty-First Century Social and Economic Imperative* (New York, NY: College Board, 1998), 8.

linked.[5] I am angry with the slow fiscal strangulation of open enrollment institutions like mine. I am angry with remediation itself. My thoughts are often drawn to a few lines from Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*: "What was it that gave Ammu this Unsafe Edge? This air of unpredictability? It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her."[6] I feel my own Unsafe Edge, some days uncomfortably close to the surface, about to leap from my lips without warning.

The students I teach take my classes because they must. We are an open-enrollment institution, but that does not guarantee students entrance into college level courses. 56% of incoming freshmen are placed in remedial classes.[7] Requisite remedial course work is based on low placement scores. Our college has two tiers of remedial English, Reading, and Math coursework, all of which consume financial aid without contributing to the student's GPA or awarding college credit. Until this work is done, these students are often locked out of even freshman level courses, since their reading, writing, and math skills are deemed insufficient for college level work.

This semester, I am blessed. Opportunity knocks. I am offered a night class. We are a small group. For once, I have more desks than students in the room. We begin with twelve, but the number will fall. Quickly. Only 26% of first time, full time students here will graduate with an Associate's Degree in the next three years.[8] The vast majority of students who disappear before graduation face non-academic obstacles: Money. Family. Addiction. Incarceration.Transportation. Illness. These are the reasons they vanish. Could we do more to help? I don't know. We don't ask them. They don't say.

With a small group, at night, on a branch campus, I feel safely insulated from supervision. Time to make my move.

Shame and silence. This is how we begin.

Resistance is my first obstacle. No one wants to take a remedial course. No one wants to be labeled as a "remedial student," not ready or able to handle college level English. They awkwardly comply with my request that we sit in a circle. I'm going to be one of *those* teachers, their faces say. I jump in. "Remediation. What does that mean?" No one is willing (or perhaps able) to answer. I dig a bit deeper. "Do you know what it means to take a remedial course?" Silence. "Hmm. What about this course? Did your adviser tell you why you were placed in a remedial English class? Do you know what to expect this semester?" Hunched shoulders and

[5] Sheryll Cashin, "Place, Not Race: Affirmative Action and the Geography of Educational Opportunity," *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform*, 47, no. 4 (2014), http://mjlr.org/category/print/.
[6] Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), 34.
[7] *Institutional Fact Book*, Updated on March 8, 2013. Office of Institutional Research.
[8] *Institutional Self Study*, December 2014.

averted eyes. Their bodies seem defensive, as though they are physically resistant to my questions.

"Okay. So, placement tests. How did that go?" Averted eyes. Defensive shrugs. I wait. No doubt this feels like a trap. For many students, just taking the placement tests is a profoundly courageous act, after a lifetime of academic marginalization or failure. But they rarely know how to articulate the emotional fallout that comes with their results. Few of them even have the vocabulary we (the executors of such placement tests) employ to explain why they did not do well: high-stakes standardized testing, test anxiety, accommodations for disabilities, etc. Yet, their resistance, their disappointment, their frustration is clear. Often, it expresses itself in passive aggressive or self-sabotaging ways throughout the semester.

While I can identify this problem, feel it as a palpable tension in the classroom, witness the way it impedes many students' future academic progress, I can't figure out how to create a space for students to vent these emotions from the beginning. Talk about the elephant in the room? Accuse the teacher of complicity in an unfair system that has caused the student to feel shame?

Finally, someone speaks. "I'm a grown man," says Josh, crossing his arms. "It's insulting. I own my own business. I raise my children. I've overcome homelessness, poverty. I've come up from the street. And this? Saying I can't do college English? I can't write?" He shakes his head in disgust.

Others echo his sentiment.

Good. They're angry. It's a start.

Day two. We invoke a ritual that will carry us through the rest of the semester. Before we launch into our material for the day, everyone gets a chance to share what they're carrying, set their burdens down (figuratively) for the duration of the class. They throw words of pain, fear, and loss into the center of our circle. I ask them to let their worries go, just for these 90 minutes. Ashley's sixteen year old son is facing jail time or house arrest. Kate's abusive ex-husband has been harassing her, and her car just broke down. Olivia's cesarean section is scheduled in three weeks. She might have "to miss a few days of class" for it. Josh's bar served a minor during a sting operation the night before. He is facing huge fines and scrambling to find a new bartender. He may lose his liquor license.

They look at each other as they share. Eye contact. Leaning in. Cross talk.

Trust. This is what we are building. And yet, some days, I don't want to trust. It violates every instinct, everything I know from my own experiences as a student. How to trust that they will, eventually, turn something in? How to trust that their course evaluations won't say, "This teacher didn't teach me anything. We didn't *do* anything, all semester, except talk." Trust that it is okay to wait, perhaps thirteen or fourteen weeks, for someone to find their voice?

Every time they deepen their own connection, as a class walk towards a place of trust, of shared expressions of and validation for one another's humanity, I am pierced by fear. What happens when they revolt? I *know*, cerebrally, intellectually, that this is my end goal. But I fear

this. I fear the backlash, the questions they might ask. If remediation is dehumanizing, if this system violates us all, why am I here? Why do I teach? Why am I complicit?

I fear having to answer these questions to myself, as well. Every time a student fails my class, I am skewered by guilt. What did we, as a college, fail to provide this student with so that he or she might be successful? By what right do I ascribe a grade, knowing that this is more than a simple, unbiased evaluation of student performance? In what ways do I invalidate or shame the student with an F? In what ways do I violate my own internal sense that we are all worthy, we are all human, and none of us has the right to judge any other? How often do I collude in a system that sees each student only through an academic lens, ignoring the larger picture of who he or she is as a complex, sophisticated human being?

Intermission:

What about non-students? What about those who never encounter college, never entertain the idea, engage with the possibility? What about Tahitia?

The very notion of pedagogy implies that we have an audience, a class, a group of learners. What about the silent, those who will never be a part of an academic community? Isn't all this worry about the ethics of pedagogy a bit absurd, given the rarefied nature of academia? My own experiences are not exempt from this worry. Forget the Ivy League debate. Forget the question of public vs. private university. Forget, even, the issue of open-enrollment junior (community) colleges vs. four-year institutions. No matter what college a student attends, even if she is underprepared, even if she fails out her first semester, the fact is that she *at least made it through the doors of a college.* Doesn't that speak to a level of agency, of autonomy, of desire on the student's part?

My friendship with Tahitia Marie (Ardoñez) Graham predates memory. We predate construction, meaning, logic, choice. We just *are*. Quantify this thing? Anatomize our relationship, deconstruct our interactions, cut it all up and label each segment? I can see the violence implicit in such an act. Yet, I wonder how else to understand our paths, the strange shifting topography of our lives.

Don't ask me to interpret. But I can tell you the facts. Or, more accurately, the folklore, the myth, the legend of Us.

Merci Ardoñez, we suppose, saw Don Graham as a way out of Honduras, both for her and her two small children. Nevermind that he was a strange sort of Christian, a Jehovah's Witness, who didn't celebrate any of the Church holidays. Nevermind that he would both love and hate her children's Otherness, adopting them, insisting on giving them his last name, and then proceeding to spend the next fifteen years trying to beat the Other out of them. Juan especially.

At least he had a house. An American name. American citizenship. American money. A way out.

I imagine Juan as a kid, probably aloof, using silence as a form of protection, a buffer against his step-father's authoritarian rule, against the repressive confines of the Witnesses' way

of life. I say imagine because as an adult he never talked about his past, or much of anything else. Not even blind drunkenness (for days, weeks, years at a time) could shake lose those truths.

Merci (Grandma Graham) would tell us his story (their story) as we perched in the kitchen waiting for the smells of baking to magically solidify into food. He hated his step-father. Hated him, but kept his last name. Hated him, but married a white girl. Blonde hair, blue eyes, freckles. Hated him, but treated his three light skinned children like heroes and the two dark skinned ones like unwanted dogs. Strange, I think now, that she would tell us this so serenely. Didn't she feel complicit? Didn't she wonder, sometimes, if she had made wrong decisions? Why tell us at all? I don't know. We never asked. She never said.

Tahitia is one of the dark ones. Slight, inky black hair, delicate features, obviously her father's daughter.

A wisp of memory, clinging softly in my mind: Tahitia is a speedy, precocious toddler. She climbs onto the coffee table, turns in a circle grinning.

"Ge'down," Juan orders, shoving her off with his foot. Hard.

Did she fall? Did she cry? Was she hurt? I don't remember.

Did he hate her because she was so much like him? He never said.

His younger sister Rose tells us stories, the only two stories she remembers from Honduras. Once, she remembers, Merci chased a jaguar out of their house with a broom. And, Rose says, they used to play a game: climb the fence, shimmy up the trees, pick the fruit and escape before the men on horses came with guns to shoot them.

Did he remember those stories? Did he remember them the same way, or differently? Would he contest the details, remind her, "No, no, you got that wrong. Remember, they were not apples, but bananas we picked?" He never said.

My life and Tahitia's are a tangle of intersections. Same oppressive love/hate relationship with the church (say cult, maybe) of Jehovah's Witnesses, that strange faith inherited from our parents. Same elementary school, same bus, same neighborhood, same friends. Friendship and family and kinship become one and the same. Same high school, same parties, same girl friends, same boy friends. We dropped out of high school in our Junior year. Got an apartment together when I was 17. Lived, loved, took care of each other.

But here's the wrinkle, the thing I don't want to explain because it has always just *been*, a part of the whole. She is the pretty one. I am the smart one.

I hate these sentences. I feel physically assaulted every time I reread them. But I don't know how else to say this. Simple? Complex? Reductive, or sad, or just true? How did those labels change us, alter our child selves, influence our futures? I wonder, now, at the power of a single word, wonder at the way a word becomes a story, and the story becomes our life.

In fifth grade, I furtively studied her face, her mannerisms, her way of carrying herself and then stared at myself for hours in the mirror, searching for at least one feature that might *slightly* resemble hers. Maybe my eyelashes curved similarly? Maybe, if I just pulled my cheeks back, so, and flattened the point of my nose a bit, maybe I would look at least a tiny bit like her?

Maybe a bit of her popularity, her effortless athleticism, her social grace would rub off, if I just wanted it enough.

In fifth grade, I got in big trouble because her little sister and I read our report cards ESPN style into the CB megaphone on her dad's truck, loud enough for the entire neighborhood to hear. "And nooowww, I present Saraaaahhhh 'Smarty Pants' Blank, straight A student *again* folks!!!" About five minutes into our performance, my mother appeared, yanked me out of the truck, and dragged me home, scolding the whole time: "Don't you realize how that made Tahitia feel? She's in her kitchen *crying* right now! You realize she might not even pass this year, right?!!!"

Well, no, I didn't realize. Not until then. She never said.

So, ask me now. How do I feel about my best friend, who lives about five miles away, yet might as well be on a different planet? How do I feel every time her life takes an economic or emotional downturn, and I get to watch poverty, discrimination, and lack of education in action? How do I feel about calling a woman my "best friend" who could not, would not, absolutely *does not* want to hear about or follow my exploits as an academic?

Catastrophe is often represented as literal, elemental, a hurricane, a tsunami. The poor are usually the hardest hit, semi-permanent shelters destroyed in an instant, no insurance, no Plan B. The media bombards us with images of the humanitarian crisis, the bodies, the grieving survivors, the decimated communities. Isn't our fascination with these moments, our almost pornographic consumption of the horrific images, our guilt-stricken donations, itself a ritual, a superstitious ward, designed to keep such events from our own doorstep?

Watch metaphor become truth become a life. We all teeter on precipices, watch our lives crumble, rebuild, renew, regenerate. But those with more have an easier time of it, you know? The support network is triggered, the insurance kicks in, we rebuild.

Tahitia is always on the edge of a catastrophe, it seems to me. Maybe this is not a true thing; maybe it is the projection of the friend with the savior complex. What if I stopped trying to rescue her? What if I saw her as whole and safe and healthy?

Yet, she is the one who calls me. Always.

"Hey, woman. I know I'm a terrible friend. I haven't talked to you in forever and now I'm calling for a favor. I feel awful, but I was wondering if you could help me..." This is how it starts. Every time.

High school drop out. Okay, fine. I'll drop out too. We'll figure this out together.

Teen mom. Alright. Who cares? No one says your age is the only indicator of maternal excellence. You'll be great.

Boyfriend/baby daddy/fiancé/husband has 1. cheated (again) 2. started using hard drugs (again) 3. gone to jail (again) 4. all of the above. Every time, I say the same things. Who needs him? Move in with me. We'll be fine.

My solutions are always temporary. I can't be her, can't live her life, can't remake her present in the halcyon future I wish for her.

So. Here is the place where I'm stuck. When she hits bottom, without exception, I've always said, "Why not go to school? Come up to the college with me. I'll help. I'll tutor you. It'll be different now. You can do it. You're older, more mature, ready to focus, get help, do whatever it takes. You know they have support for people who have trouble in school [my euphemism for Tahitia's multiple learning disabilities]. Just try it."

My premise here is that education is a safety net. It is a shelter. It is the insurance that, should that shelter crumble, she will have options. Insert every rote argument touted by every college ever. Implication: college is inherently valuable. It is collateral that protects us from life's catastrophes, insulates us, or, sometimes, even prevents them in the first place.

Why do I accept all of this? Why must I assume that this thing I, we, do is inherently valuable? Can education erase the scar tissue of her/my/our past? Can her kids eat education?

Hmm. On one hand, despite its many flaws, its impossibilities, its violence and repression, I *do* believe that education is inherently valuable. It does protect me in many ways from the dangers that Tahitia faces every day. There are intangible rewards, as well: the thrill of a new discovery, the rewards of teaching, the joy of connections to people, to theories, to ideas.

On the other hand, I am troubled. Still troubled.

As I write this, I think of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story "Very Old Man with Enormous Wings." Why must the old man speak in tongues and perform godly miracles in order to be recognized as an angel? Why must he adorn himself with the trappings of an institution for his grace, his sublime nature to become obvious? Why do the villagers even assume that grace and sublime wisdom are the hallmarks of godliness? Who knows? What if absurdity, weakness are the ways one is marked as god's chosen?

Why do any of us presume to know the hallmarks of a scholar, of a learner, of a teacher-student or a student-teacher[9]? We are sure, so sure, the already chosen ones, that we know what it is to educate, to be educated.

My fantasy goes like this. One day, Tahitia finally decides that she is ready, that she can redefine her self-image. She will be one of the smart ones, too. And she'll use facets of her life that have marked her as disadvantaged to her advantage: poverty equals financial aid; minority status (assuming I could convince her to check that box for hispanic/latina) equals improved chances for admission; being an adult, first generation college student with disabilities equals increased access to student support programs and services.

And then (indulge me; this is *my* fantasy after all), she starts making connections. Connections between her family's past and the interplay of race and culture in America today, connections between history and sociology, connections between economics and imperialism, macro and micro. Her freshman year, she takes classes on the history of North and South

[9] Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (London: Penguin Education, 1996).

America. She studies Spanish. Eventually, she reaches out to her family still in Honduras.[10] The pieces fall into place. Now, her father's rejection makes sense. She forgives him, moves on, ends the cycle of self-loathing and self-mutilation. Maybe she stops drinking. Maybe she pursues a helping profession. Finds a steady job. A healthier way to give back, heal old wounds, make a life of meaning, safety, happiness.

Even then, I'm not done. I want more: I want her to fall in love with learning. I want her to use education to make sense and meaning from the chaos. I want her to affirm what *I* do, the way that I handle these same things.

Why must I assume that Tahitia would benefit from college? Why do I assume that she needs anything at all? And how, I wonder, did I deputize myself as the one who could fulfill those needs, whatever they might be? Why am I turning myself into a mental and emotional pretzel to improve my pedagogy if pedagogy will categorically miss the mark in influencing/impacting the lives I care most about in the first place? After all, my fantasy is an outgrowth of my need, rather than hers.

Isn't it strange that, for many of us, we seek the student-teachers and teacher-students relationship in our classroom, but not outside the classroom? Many of us do teach "for" someone, or many someones, like Tahitia. We consciously or unconsciously dedicate our lives, our careers to investigating injustice, perhaps giving voice to victims, seeking to improve the quality of life for someone somewhere.

I wonder, though, if my internal motivations cloud the present moment. Am I so lost in my focus on people like Tahitia that I miss the stories of the students in front of me? Or perhaps the reverse is true: perhaps I miss seeing and accepting Tahitia as she is because I am so busy projecting the values, motivations, and goals of academia onto her life. Don't I imply, in telling her story, that she cannot tell it herself? How might I understand and better respond to these competing narratives? Is there a better way to hold myself accountable for my pedagogy and the way it influences all of my choices, in and out of the classroom?

Perhaps that is the trouble. If my classroom pedagogy bears moral obligation, and if that moral obligation is to follow me wherever I go, in any dealings I have with anyone, anywhere, then what would that look like? How would I live such a life? Or, if that life has already found me, how do I keep my own fierce need to understand, to explain, and then, predictably, to solve in check long enough to let others find their own way?

In the Wake:

[10] We think her grandfather may still be alive. He was, the last time Juan called, in 2002. They found a cousin who spoke some English. Juan mustered the last cobwebs of Spanish from the disused corners of his mind. They spoke. Promised to call again. Never did.

After Juan's funeral, Tahitia pulls me aside. Strange that he would die as I write this essay. It complicates my narrative. I do not know if I am now speaking in the past or present tense. I am lost.

I expect her to be inconsolable, loud, devastated. Instead, she is quiet, gathered. My friend, the social butterfly, afraid of thunderstorms, afraid of the dark, afraid of being alone, wanders solitary on the fringe of people swirling about on this chill night. I expect her to attach herself to me, cling, weep. She does not. Her eyes are far away. I don't know where she has gone.

Night falls. We are outside, spread across the grass at the campground where Juan spent his last summer. Bodies gather around a camp fire. Children run through the dark, celebrating their unexpected mid-week freedom from bedtime curfews.

Gently, she approaches me, pulls me away from the crowd, into the dark. Tahitia says this: "Hey, woman. I know I'm a terrible friend. I haven't talked to you in forever. But I'm glad you're here. And I have to talk to you."

She tells me that, since Juan had no will, all five kids had to sign off on every single medical decision made during his final days. On the last day, the other four were ready to terminate life support and let him go. She was the hold out. They argued. She resisted. They pushed.

Finally, she made this deal: she would go into Juan's room, alone, for ten minutes. When she came out, she would sign the release.

Tahitia is a Certified Nurse's Assistant. She works with elderly patients every day. Death is familiar to her. But familiarity flies out the window when the person dying is one of your own.

Her father lay in the hospital bed, shrunken, looking decades older than he really was. Eyes closed, unresponsive. She took his hand and told him: "Dad, I know you and me have had our troubles. Things weren't great back when I was younger. But I'm so glad we've had time to make it up, and get close. I'm so glad you got to meet all your grand kids and you know they love you. You know I love you too. And you know I forgive you. I don't hold anything against you."

At the funeral, standing outside, in the dark, on a cold, rainy October night, she tells me, "As I said that, he passed. Right as soon as I stopped talking."

Did he hear her? Do I believe? Can I, for this one moment, set aside my critical lens and simply allow this to *be*?

Does it matter? Because, what I heard, as she spoke, was this: Tahitia Marie (Ardoñez) Graham does not need college. She doesn't need me. Today, in this moment, she is whole, and healthy, and provides safety to those around her. She shepherded her father's passing and let the wounds, the grievances of a lifetime pass from her at the same time. Juan, your daughter forgives you. Do I? Maybe. Probably not.

It is easy, simple, and it is not. I am still tormented. She is still poor and uneducated and an under-employed alcoholic with four children to care for. She is part of a multi-generational cycle of poverty and oppression. She perpetually resists these forces, and yet will adamantly deny her need to escape, reject any and all words that might give shape to her resistance. Talking about the news, current events, public policy, and social justice infuriates her. Any suggestion that our conversation might be heading towards uncomfortable emotional territory is immediately rejected. When, where, and how do I make my peace with that? Dare I claim to understand something that she doesn't have the words to say? Or, the inverse: dare I claim that, until she has the words to say it, my own are meaningless?

Isn't that how it always is? I get lost in the story. One, single, individual piece. I try to back up, attain a critical distance, in order to see the issues at play here. Yet another impossible task to add to my mounting list. I think one of my questions is internal to academia: how do we make our pedagogy more trusting, more facilitative, more empowering for students? How to quarantine our own needs, clear them out of the way, make room for the students' needs? How to escape the constant pressure demanding that our pedagogy meet curricular guidelines, production goals (both the tangible "products" of the course and the intangible "product": the well trained student)? How to open the door for students to notice the structures, the great screaming global needs of our species, the world invisible from their own front doors, yet ever present around us all?

The other is external, seeming (to me) inscrutable, immobile. How to ask this question, even? How to understand? Why do we do what we do? I've traced my reasons here, but I don't pretend they are valid, justified.

I don't teach for Tahitia. Not exclusively.

I teach for me.

Yet, it's a strange form of selfishness that gives, sacrifices, bleeds, hopes, tries, fails, tries again.

Heartbreak. This may be my pedagogy. Give until your heart breaks. Ask until their hearts break. Again. Again. Again.

So, we break. And break. And break.

Phase Three: Grief and Acceptance

In week six, I have one of the highest moments of my career to date. In this remedial English class, we are talking about the next essay, a themed response to several readings. I point to units in the book, ask the class which one might strike their collective fancy. Josh leans back, settles himself in his chair, crosses his arms. This is impressive in and of itself, given his 6'5" linebacker's physique. I have come to realize that he does this when he is about to speak Truth. "Let us pick our own topic." He looks at the other students, makes eye contact with each one, nods, gathers their collective affirmation. "We'll pick it, research it over break. Each of us will find an article, summarize it, bring it to class. Then, we can break it all down together, figure out

our own personal take on it. And we'll all share our essays after we write them, see how they are different. Talk about it." Heads nod.

I am hesitant. "You understand that this is *harder* than the assignment other classes do? You know that I can't require you to do research in this class?"

"Who cares," he asks. He doesn't even look at me. Rhetorical question. I am tangential, almost superfluous to this process. "This way, we pick a topic we care about. This way, it's real."

Indeed.

Ownership. This is what they have demanded. To direct, engage, own their own learning, despite being in an environment hostile to engagement and inquiry. I can't wait to witness this process, observe the topic they select, read their essays. I feel like I'm flying.

Two days later, Josh sends me a text. "Due to childcare issues, I will not be able to come to class. I'm withdrawing."

I call. Keep calling. I have to know why. When I finally reach him, he tells me that his daughters have been living with their mother in another town. She is now incarcerated, "probably for a while" This is a casual euphemism around here. A state prison sits two miles away from the branch campus where I teach. We are a prison town. We are all fluent in the language of this story. Details are irrelevant. So Josh's daughters are suddenly living with him. New school. New house. New life. No one has told them where mommy went. Not yet.

I beg, plead. "Bring your girls. Come when you can. Take an incomplete if you have to. Don't quit."

He responds in a text message: "I. don't. want. to. Got to do what's right for my family. I hope you're teaching this class when I come back."

Grief and loss howl through me. Josh was the voice of our class, the heart, the insightful presence that inspired others. It is not, cannot be the same class without him.

When I break the news, the entire class echoes my feelings. They press me to call him, insist that I put the phone on speaker. Their messages swirl, overlap, echo one another. My class is in chaos.

"Come back!"

"We miss you."

"We will make you cookies."

"Just come back."

We need you. This is what I think. We need you and you're gone (for perfectly legitimate, heart-breaking reasons).

And, says a small, selfish voice in my head, there goes my classroom dynamic.

Fuck.

I read and read and read. I'm looking for guidance. I seek hope, inspiration, comfort. Abstraction frustrates me. Sure, I think, tossing another text aside. That is a great *theory*, but how does it look in a classroom? How does it work in practice? Show me.

With every new story a student shares, I want to fix it. All of it. Their poverty and homelessness and cycles of addiction or abuse or incarceration. And that puts me in an impossible position.

Because the only tools at my disposal are tools of invitation: please, come to class. Please, if you cannot come to class, stay in contact. Let me know you are okay. Please, pick a topic to write about that is important to you. Yes, any topic. This is not a trap. Please, can you share a bit of yourself with the rest of us honestly, openly, courageously, despite the fears that might hold you back? Can you go beyond telling us what you think about topics that are difficult, dangerous, and move into how and why you think those things?

In other words, can you discover something/anything in my class that would cause you to want to learn it, of your own volition, without prompting from me?

The only thing I know how to do, the only thing I can offer them, is my attention and respect. An environment that is unfamiliar and scary. A classroom dynamic that I try to moderate without controlling. A sham of a curriculum that I subvert whenever possible.

And I do it because I hope, somehow, that education will be the tool they leverage to fix their own lives. Not because this strategy appears to be working, but because I don't know what else to do.

And, what do they want? Such a deceptively simple question. Maybe they wish to be heard, to speak of their wounds and traumas and survival. Or maybe they don't. For every student who finds my course a place of validation, there is another who feels cheated. Why didn't I just teach grammar? What's with the head games? Why not just teach how to write?

Our numbers dwindle. There are still six students officially enrolled in the class. Sometimes, only two or three show up. This is not a class anymore, I think. I don't know what it is.

Despite my wish to stop controlling this space, to let go of my needs and focus on theirs, I am still shepherding them towards a product that will achieve my goals in this experimental space. I insist on exploring the things they do not say. They resist. Perhaps they suspect that their risk is bigger than mine. I will have another class, another semester, another chance to experiment, to perform (or misperform). Our classroom is a place of strange emotional contradictions. Trust ebbs and flows. Students who feel comfortable telling me in great detail about their private lives, their struggles, their traumas, shut down as soon as I ask a direct question about the role of emotion in their stated, public beliefs.

They pick the topic for our second-to-last unit: social welfare. They are eager, hungry; they chat happily amongst themselves about all the examples of welfare abuse they will be able to cite. They are almost lustful, eager to criticize and shame others. I am deeply uncomfortable, torn, unsure of what to do. On one hand, I do not want to make my own views on the subject apparent. On the other hand, the class presents such a homogenous front, united in opposition to "government intervention" or "stealing from hard working Americans so lazy people can sit around doing nothing" that I dearly wish to present another view. What are they not saying?

Why aren't they saying it? I'm not sure how to excavate a space, make room for answers to those questions. Desperate to try something that will propel movement in this conversation, I offer them an article on the role of shame. The author argues that welfare recipients *should* feel shame, as this is the best method of discouraging people from using/abusing any form of social welfare. Eagerly, they read it, come back to class full of agreement. Yes, they say. This is right.

We spend time defining social welfare, discussing a timeline of its evolution, thinking out loud about who should be in charge of this obligation, and who should be the recipients. They do not see that I am nudging them towards a trap. They finally conclude that any form of financial or tangible assistance from a government organization is social welfare. I am keenly aware that they are implicating one another with this definition; not one among them can say he or she has never used any social welfare. I ask, "Does financial aid count?" They agree that it does. "And so, each of you should feel shame then, for consuming it?"

Curiously, they fiercely deny that they, as individuals, should feel shame for their use of social welfare. Shame should exist, yes. But it should belong to everyone else, to those who "deserve" it.

From my vantage point, it seems like simple logic. They make the initial claim: All welfare recipients should feel shame. Next, they admit: We are welfare recipients. Why do they not move instantly to the final conclusion: We should feel shame.

The essays they produce for this unit are lukewarm at best. The cliché would have it that "their hearts weren't in it", but I think this is untrue. Guilt, denial, and shame, all emotions dangerously close to the heart, seem to be at play here. Say, rather, that their language failed to articulate the danger, the closeness of the subject.

I feel a need to defend my choices. I tell myself that I am trying to create a space for what Marshall Alcorn's *Resistance to Learning* describes as the "emotional assimilation of information," a methodology that attempts to encourage students to develop "an emotional awareness of a range of emotional contexts that makes thought meaningful."[11] While I suspect that students, or indeed all of us, crave a more authentic method of communicating than the standard three-part essay, I still feel guilty for imposing this theory on my students. Having felt these pains of articulation/discovery myself, I understand their fierce resistance as we mingle thought and emotion in our discussions and writing, resistance that Alcorn terms a "desire not to know."

As we move to the final unit, based loosely on the department's guidelines, I hold my breath. My emotional barriers are wearing thin. I am trying, maybe, not to let my Unsafe Edge show through. This unit, which the textbook dubs "A Diverse Society," revolves around a handful of essays, most of which I find dull or abstract. And then there is Brent Staples' "Black Men in Public Spaces." Purely by coincidence, the night we meet to discuss this essay is the

[11] Marshall Alcorn, *Resistance to Learning: Overcoming the Desire-Not-To-Know in Classroom Teaching*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 44.

night that Ferguson, Missouri erupts in flames. My concern for my students is suddenly destabilized by a competing agony over this news.

I am wounded and angry and feeling dangerously intolerant, now, of the kinds of generic phrases they mouthed over and over during the unit on social welfare. I fear to speak the night that Ashley announces, "I just don't see why they are rioting. What's their problem?" Where are the competing voices? No one disagrees. The closest anyone comes to addressing this vacuum is to say, again, "I wish Josh were here." Why, I want to ask. Why would that make a difference? Why does it require a person of color to explain this to you?

Of course, I don't say that. I realize too late that this class is a space dangerous to me. Rather than proving to myself what I wished to believe, that these students who have struggled so much already are "my people" and therefore will be more empathic, more open than other students, I am discovering that they are neither more nor less than any other college students. They are just regular people, mostly wishing for the semester to be over, for the highest grade possible with the least amount of effort, for the troubling issues we discuss to disappear.

In another section of this class, Xavier, a native of St. Louis, is working himself towards what I can only describe as a scream. His discussion of the exact same material is furious, honest, brilliant, self-reflective, and complex. Always on the lookout for ways to prompt movement among my students, I immediately formulate a new equation: the night class plus Xavier will yield the results I want. But, although I beg him to, he can't find time in his schedule to visit the night class. Even worse, he asks me not to share his essay with anyone. "All these white people are already afraid of big black dudes," he tells me. "No way am I gonna let anyone see my essay. They'll be calling the police to say I'm gonna kill them all in their sleep." And so I'm stumped. The semester grinds to an end, and I am left feeling unsatisfied, almost resentful of the careless and mechanical essays my students turn in.

All of it feels like failure to me. We did not achieve the kind of critical engagement I know is possible. Honestly, I don't know if any of them learned a damn thing in my classroom. Even worse, I am reminded of how utterly irrelevant I am to this process: Xavier, without the benefit of any of my clever, radical pedagogical experimentation, arrived at the end I wished the students in my night class to reach. My course evaluations read ,"She was really nice," "I liked her," and "Bring more food next time." Nice? I bled for a semester, and now I'm nice?

My conscience is coming awake as well, bitterly tearing at my layers of self-protective scholarship and professional self-righteousness. Not only did I fail to accomplish what I wished; I was so focused on achieving that end that I stopped taking stock of each student's value, accomplishments, insights as-is. I was so lost in my own desires that I forgot to consider the desires of my students.

I am ashamed.

Many of us are taught to quarantine emotion to our personal lives, and equate our professional selves with objective rationality. If that is so, then my classes clearly break barriers between

professional and personal contact. We blur the lines between thought and emotion, realizations carried in the body versus realizations of the mind. Is this a way to negotiate the space between the "desire not to know" and a willingness to assimilate something new? Or is it just a fine way to get myself in trouble and watch the whole thing blow up in my face?

What I ask of my students is that they *hold* themselves in precisely the moment when they desire not to know, dwell in that place, and actually describe the trauma of being moved from desiring not to know to an awareness which might threaten the structure of their internal worlds. I ask students to willingly engage in acts of thought, recognition, and writing that are traumatic to self.

But I ask myself: knowing the ways that truth rips open hidden wounds, knowing that this is not a kind act, is this ethical? Consider this essay. I do not want to write it. I do not want to know some of the things that I have written. My body tenses, my emotions rebel as I type difficult sentences. By what right do I lead my students to experience this type of pain as they begin to recognize thoughts they wish to deny?

What other choices are available? Should each of us go on in willful denial, even when, as a collective, this does us all harm?

See? Now we are back to that premise of academia: that, by instructing the individual, we can improve that individual. That, if we instruct enough individuals, we will improve the collective. It will become a better world for us all.

But I wonder. My class is a place focused on individuals. My ideal notion of pedagogy is entirely devoted to individuals. What if that is the only possibility? What if we abandon this idea that our ripples will become waves will become movement will become a new, better world order? What if every individual student were the only end, and never a means (object) subordinated to a larger purpose?

In my personal life, as well, I am consumed by individuals. In my experience, a single moment when one individual's attention is arrested by the needs of a second individual, triggering an empathic response, is more powerful in inspiring a shift in ideological thought than years of "instruction"—classroom based or otherwise. Perhaps that is why we protect ourselves so zealously from "surprise" moments of empathy; we are aware of the danger to our own systems of thought and belief posed by empathy for a single, individual Other.

Letting Go

Now, perhaps, I am ready to admit the thing that has simultaneously troubled and pushed me as I write. If Tahitia does not need me, but I need her (obviously, I need her…here she is, interwoven into every pedagogical thought in my mind, every word that I type), then, what does that make me? What does that make us? How can I remain a part of a thing, such as a relationship, a friendship, a lifetime of kinship and shared memories, while simultaneously pursuing a career that prompts me to separate myself, objectify, anatomize, and analyze this thing? What do I owe her? What might she ask of me?

Likewise, what of my students? What might they ask of me?

During winter break, I meet Amy by chance at a local restaurant. She approaches my table, says, "Hey, I know you." She has gained weight. Her hand does not cover her mouth as she smiles. She only stays a moment before hurrying away, but I have time to tell her that I'm very glad that she is well. I hope that my eyes say the things that words cannot.

As the next semester begins, Ashley finds me. Her life's cares crash over me, a tidal wave of words. This becomes a ritual: at least once a week, she continues to visit me, tell me about her crazy life. It is hard work, this kind of listening. But I'm glad she is here. Now officially worthy of taking Freshman English, she is surprised to find that she is doing well.

Some stay disappeared. Others come back, for a moment, or a semester, or until they don't need to anymore. Eventually, a few may tell me what they wanted or needed from my class. If they find the words. If I ask. If I am able to listen.

At the outset, I admitted that I am not sure I belong in academia. I've framed my concerns for my dear friend Tahitia as a desire to make her more like me. But, rest assured, this is also a concern that I am becoming less like her. When will I get too deep? Where is that tipping point, after which I have gone too far, and no amount of code switching will ever let me go home?

Maybe, when I get to that place, I will remember that I still have many stories. My own. Tahitia's. Naomi's, and Josh's, and Cruz's, and Amy's. We all carry the burden of our individual and collective stories. For those of us who make our living seeking knowledge, cataloging thoughts, and then passing our discoveries on to students, it may be our first instinct to interpret and explain those stories. It is easy to forget how individual, fragile, ephemeral each story is.

Perhaps I am learning to take great care with the stories of others. To be gentle. To bear witness. To let them be and simply travel with them, even if it is much the harder thing to do.