Editors' Letter

Wednesday, October 4, 2006

I've got something serious on my mind, and, although there may be some question about the appropriateness of sharing it in this venue, my mind and heart cannot say no. So, walk along with me a bit with this. My heart is full, and, in the end, there's a point that I'm heading for.

I'm on my way to a funeral today. Students are never supposed to die before their teachers—that's a granite-hewn rule as unbreakable as the one parents cling fiercely to about their sons and daughters. But, nonetheless, my former student Zac, his remains on the way to a funeral home today after a quick flight from Tokyo amid a blizzard of bureaucratic red tape, has perished. Alone. Senselessly. Period. With all but the dots of the "i's" and the crosses of the "t's" to be applied to his dissertation, he was all but finished with his Ph.D. work at FSU-Tallahassee and in Japan to present a paper on Samuel Beckett to a prestigious audience of scholars. But the presentation never happened. A world of opportunities about to burst into bloom for him. Depression blighted those buds. Gone.

Through all of the love, second-guessing, despair, and anger I know I'll share with those who'll gather to commemorate Zac's life, I'll be comforted by one thing: my memory of a relationship that lasted long after we stopped being student and

teacher to each other. In 1996, this long-haired Eddie Vetter look and sound-alike emerged from a crowded evening night class on "Shakespeare's Tragedies" with the intensity of his questions and his insightful written analyses. Amid the barely controlled chaos of twenty-eight talented people competing to be heard, Zac stood out—not because he was louder or more assertive than the rest, but because he simply was the one. I think all of us know that, during a long career, each of us will be blessed with the presence of a small handful of students who are extraordinary. Zac was that.

And, when I recognized what and who he was, I didn't screw up. When "Shakespeare's Tragedies" was over, I approached Zac with an offer I'd never made to an undergraduate—to be a teaching intern in a Humanities "Medieval and Renaissance Traditions" class the following semester. Zac was initially puzzled by my offer—he was a Music major, with no grounding in literature or other associated humanities disciplines. But he accepted, and the class went swimmingly. To me, a teaching internship has always meant sharing everything, from the selection and delivery and assessment of course materials to the development of the oral and writing tasks for participants —total team-teaching. And that's what we did. Zac thrived on that experience, and his student audience loved him.

But that was just the beginning. We co-presented in two sessions at a national Humanities conference in Jacksonville a year after that; we collaborated on Zac's first publication (in a national journal for the Humanities); Zac served as my teaching intern in my last "Summer Session in Ireland" in 1998; and then he began to distinguish himself as a graduate student in English at Minnesota State University-Mankato for the next few years. Wonderful exemplary teaching in composition and Gen. Ed. literature; a successfully completed program; a huge thesis on myth, archive, and folklore in Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude* which it was my honor to direct, and the longest thesis defense in the history of our program, simply because there was so much to say about it.

And there was the other stuff he did. He served a couple of years for us as a fixed-term instructor. And, along with that, he

spear-headed two very successful "Time in Transition" conferences at MSU that drew key-note speakers and presenters from around the country and abroad. He did a lot of the important grant-writing and organizing while managing to present, as well, at those conferences. He was a dynamo, a foreshadowing of the kind of faculty member we knew he'd ultimately become. I joked with him about how I'd be able to pass him the baton of my job because I'd be retiring just about the time we both expected he'd be getting done at FSU. Fat chance. I'm pretty sure now that we wouldn't have been able to compete for his highly-regarded services.

Eight years of Zac. What a gift. Mutually fruitful in its reciprocity. A mirror of the mentoring relationship when it works well. As Derek Jeter asserts in a TV ad promoting Major League Baseball, "I live for this."

Well, all of this is great, and devastatingly sad, but so what? What could it possibly have to do with you and with the contents of this latest number of *MEJ*? Everything, I think. My carryings-on about Zac relate directly to what you and I strive to do every day—connect with our audience, attempt to discover what our students know, what they need to know, and how they need the stuff that we're engaging them in delivered. It's all about audience. My most abysmal failures in the classroom have always occurred—regardless of how impeccably prepared I was—when I've neglected to consider whether what I'm about to present will serve and be understood by my students. My greatest successes seem to happen—even when I'm badly prepared—when I've discovered a way for students to participate directly and actively in the enterprise. When I get out of their way, invite them (in the best way possible) to put me out of business. That can't happen if we're not listening to our audience, using little assessment strategies to gauge the relative effectiveness of what we're asking them to do and then adjusting to that audience accordingly.

Our classrooms may never be filled with Zacs. We may never be able to point to each one of them as illumining small pieces of our small careers. But every one of them is important. Our teaching cannot be even marginally successful unless we attend to what they do and do not say, what they need and do not need.

And, I'm proud to say, this number of *MEJ* is the best I've been affiliated with for that reason. Each of the essays you'll read in the following pages—whether it be about teaching literature, composition, language, or redefining our relationship to our profession—is all about audience. The diversity of those audiences is one of our greatest challenges, and you'll find a couple of essays that represent that challenge eloquently. Michael Lomonico, the key-note speaker at MCTE's spring conference in Rochester and director of the Folger Library's efforts to pollinate new, dynamic, participatory strategies for teaching Shakespeare to young people, has graced our journal with a short pedagogical piece. An elegantly-written essay on the uses of historical and cultural materials as a starting point for helping students to open up Irish works like MacLaverty's *Cal* was submitted by Beth McCullough and has been designated this year's winner of "*MEJ* Best Essay" and a $350 prize (the joy of this resides in the fact that this award could have gone to one of several excellent submissions). And, finally, this issue has included for the first time a section entitled "The Idea Exchange" that contains tips, assignment ideas, classroom management strategies, and suggestions for promoting better writing and classroom discussion submitted by your teaching peers. We're very much hoping that you'll continue to contribute your own suggestions about what works for you in your classroom, specifically for your student audience.

And audience is what we're about. Most of us would be out on the streets doing some unpleasant heavy lifting without that audience. We choose not to listen to the voices or silences in our classroom at our peril, and theirs. I'm certain that, in my two and a half-hour ride down to Winona today with a close friend of Zac's, we'll agonize together about whether there was anything we could have done or said, opportunities for staying connected with him that we missed, messages behind a telephonic voice that we failed to encrypt, e-mail notes left unreturned. We'll never know now. But I can treasure our relationship, one founded upon recognizing what one important member of one of my classroom audiences needed and carrying that forward into some significant rewards for both of us well beyond that classroom.

And he carried that attentiveness forward beautifully into his relationship with his own students. There's consolation in that.

Enjoy the issue.

William D. Dyer