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WHY DO I STAY IN TEACHING?

by Nancy Hood Stone

I am inundated by August. I just checked my trusty dictionary to reassure myself that the metaphor is accurate. Inundate, I learned, literally, means covered with water. Everything sticks to everything else. I pulled a paperback from my bookshelf yesterday, and a six foot row of books came out, all of a piece. The old screen door sticks to its frame; my body sticks to damp sheets.

I'm also feeling inundated by the daily headlines: inflation continues its climb, the air controllers' strike, another Irishman has starved himself to death, Reagan and Weinberger say we will build the neutron bomb, and Fidel Castro

accuses the United States of biological warfare.

It's time for the annual reassessment of my life. If this activity seems a bit strange, I account for it simply by recalling Maslowe's hierarachy of values. Survival activities come first. The only way I can lift my head from the torrents of August torpor is to take a fresh look, gain a breath of objectivity, at what I am doing and why I am doing it.

I teach English in an inner-city community college. The key question I raise every August, after summer school, is "Why do I stay in teaching?" Some years back I used to accuse myself of apathy, of getting into the proverbial rut, of being afraid to try business ventures or to explore other assorted career options. But that was before I spent ten years out of college teaching, working in both the business world and human service sectors. In January, 1979, I came, full circle, back to teaching which I now recognized as my first love.

Yet, there are days when I still question my rational faculties. Is it rational to choose a career as a labor of love, knowing about the pay scale and job insecurity? Am I really a masochist or a naive idealist? In my older age, am I going to become an irresponsible whiner who's not been totally realistic about teaching as a profession? These and other nagging questions torture me every August.

All right, I tell myself, let's be objective and simply tally up the plus-es and minus-es of my chosen work. Let's be hardheaded to avoid sloppy sentimentality; let's look at the negatives first.

First, there is job insecurity. Having resigned a college

tenure contract in 1969 (no one told me what would happen to the teaching market, and my family needed me at home that year -- a serious but separate feminist issue I won't go into here), I work on what is called a "temporary, limited" contract. In plain words, this means that whether or not I get to teach, or how many credit hours I teach, depends upon the enrollment figures from quarter to quarter. (This system, it seems, is necessary because of state budget considerations. Colleges cannot afford to be caught with an extra stable of teachers on permanment contracts should enrollment decline.)

Some quarters I've taught only one or two courses and taken second or third jobs for basic sustenance. Other quarters I've been lucky enough to teach fifteen credit hours, a full-time load by community college standards. In translation, fifteen credit hours means fifteen hours in the classroom and roughly thirty hours a week in student conferences, preparation and grading. Not a bad workload, but whether or not I'll be hired to do it remains a quarterly bout with nearly ulcer-producing anxieties. In this rational, balancing out mood, I wonder how many other workers have to go through these doldrums of insecurity every three months. And, ironically, I'm a much better teacher now than I was when I was in demand, with constant job offers in the '50s and '60s.

On a limited contract, there is virtually no voice in union negotiations with the state, no accumulation of credit toward a sabbatical or leave of absence, and I pay my own health insurance for at least two unemployed months a year. And some days I wonder: "Doth the limited contract make cowards of us

all?" It is harder to speak out when one is so easily replaceable. But this, too, is a separate issue. As I grow older, as much as I hate to admit my weaknesses, sabbaticals, security, and retirement kinds of things become increasingly important. About fifteen working years left, I tell myself, and what will happen to me then with inadequate retirement funds, no real estate or other investment possibilities, and Social Security iffy at best?

The second big negative is the salary, but everyone has heard this before. The top of the teaching scale is the bottom of the community college administrative scale (about $27,000). But since I'm somewhere near the bottom of the teaching scale (having been given credit for only three years prior teaching experience), I bring home less than $900 per month for only ten months a year. For a single family income, this figure means no family vacations, a lot of hot dogs, and the $2.00 matinees at the movies. The vacations are usually spent doing more grad school or taking a temporary clerking job.

I see that the air controllers think $33,000 average wages are inadequate for the responsibility they carry. After all, they make life and death decisions as do physicians; we in education are responsible only for the training of minds and skills. Corporate executives and attorneys make six figure salaries, but they are responsible for the weighty budget and legal decisions of multi-million dollar companies. Plumbers and postal workers begin at eight or nine dollars an hour, but toilets need to be fixed and mail needs to be carried. I'm not being a snob; I believe all valuable work deserves dignity and

financial compensation. I'd be one of the first to complain if these services were not available, and the workers deserve adequate income.

The whole thing, however, makes me wonder where this country places its real values. Artists and writers are notoriously poverty-stricken as are child-care and geriatric workers, and homemakers have no tangible income. As I cast my rather jaundiced eye over the inequities of salaries paid for work done, it is obvious that a retired military officer or corporate executive is considered more valuable to society than someone who contributes to the arts or humanities.

I'm not greedy; I've never desired a new car every year, a fancy house, or even a snowmobile. But it would be nice to be freed of wondering if I can make my rent payment and my student loan payment, if I can help my sons who are working their way through college, or even if I can eventually trade off my 1970 car for a more dependable model. And I find that on a subjective level, feeling appreciated is tied somewhat closely to wages received. Despite my own belief that I've been performing valuable services all my life, the lack of financial reward eventually chips away at one's feelings of self-worth. I give myself pep talks, but the reality of bill-paying each month is a constant reminder that society does not value me as a contributing member. Some days, that hurts -- still. Money obviously does not buy happiness, but the lack of it decreases options and brings stresses probably equal to that which the air controllers suffer.

But I must lift my head from mid-summer mugginess and

potential self-pity to assess the life-giving fresh air of rewards in teaching. They are many and diverse, centering largely on emotional and intellectual satisfactions.

First, there is life style. I have the freedom to come and go from campus as I wish, as long as I meet my classes and keep office hours for student conferences. I can, if I wish, do my preparation and grading at home or in the library, at midnight on Tuesday or at 5:00 a.m. on Sunday. For me, this is a real plus. My internal time-clock has never functioned well on a regimented nine to five schedule, and I was an early advocate for flex time in the business community. I may actually work fifty hours some weeks, thirty hours other weeks, since it is my decision as to how much time and which hours I put into my classes. But I also know I feel best when I've "given my all," so a certain conscientiousness and desire to serve students well keeps me from exploiting the delicious freedom from punching time clocks.

Then I must look at the very activities which constitute my work. I can do things I love best. I can read books which interest me, write lectures and design classes around subject matter which seems pertinent, conduct my classes in the way I wish, and keep abreast not only with my field but with the pulse of today's students. These activities keep my mind alive, my spirit youthful, my creative juices flowing, my sense of humor intact -- most days.

And there is a dynamic in the classroom which never ceases to excite me. I think I like both the built-in audience and subsequent interchanges, for something vital is often actually

happening before my eyes as a concept is grasped, a new skill achieved, a new idea or confidence is born. Not that every class is exciting; sometimes I think I could stand on my head and the students wouldn't even notice, but other times that magic happens and the classroom is vibrant. At these times I feel enormously rewarded and have often learned as much as I've given.

Every time I experience these August angsts, I call to mind a few choice memories. Some have come from my own mistakes that I finally saw through.

One incident revolves around an assignment I'd been giving for years in freshman English: "Write a process analysis." I'd explain that details must be arranged chronologically so that the reader could clearly grasp the how-to directions being given. I'd illustrate with what I thought were colorful and cogent examples, but I kept getting boring papers on subjects like, "How to Change the Oil in a 1975 Mustang."

Finally one day, a student who'd been struggling through the class with D's (it was his second time around for Comp 101), wrote a paper on "How to Flunk English in Three Easy Steps." The paper was not brilliant by Modern Language Association standards, but it was brilliant for Comp 101. Even his erratic sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation has emerged from murky depths to achieve some semblance of clarity and order as he expounded on his unorthodox-for English-class topic. He'd obviously been turned on by a subject so close to his heart.

I used the paper as an example in later classes and have since received some marvelous papers ranging from "How Not to

Fall in Love Three Times a Year" to "How Not to Take Your Saint Bernard on a Car Trip" (sub-titled "Travels with Charlie's Carsickness"). The injection of humor helped us get beyond dull stuffiness and pedantry to begin enjoying the task at hand: explaining a process clearly. My brave and funny student had, in his desperation, taught me a valuable lesson.

Another jewel I draw from my treasure chest every August, as I begin to redesign classes for fall, concerns class discussion of a Katherine Anne Porter essay on the pitfalls of romantic love. I had thought it choice material, relevant to student concerns, controversial social comment on the American way of life, and a chance to have students write an argumentative, pro or con paper on traditional social customs. What I had failed to take sufficient note of in my preparation was that nearly half my class were international students.

One of them, during the discussion, found the courage to say that he didn't understand the essay at all. It seems that in his country there is no concept of romantic love and polygamy is the standard practice: for males, at least, the more wives, the more social status. The American students, at first dumbfounded, were then simply curious, and they asked penetrating questions. The foreign students revealed that they saw American divorce as immoral, nothing more than serial polygamy without taking responsibility for wife #1, the most honored wife in their system.

The interchange was lively but polite, non-judgmental but mutually enlightening. By the end of class, I was convinced that the cultural exchange was far more valuable than the

precise dissection of the essay that I'd planned. Incidentally, some strong and discerning papers came out of the whole incident and I learned, again, that mistakes are sometimes gold mines for learning.

These kinds of classroom activity remain prime reasons for staying in teaching. I am never bored. I am both humbled and stimulated by the often curious turn of events. But let me continue to count the plus-es; I begin to feel a fresh wind reviving my sagging and soggy spirits.

Next, there is the chance to socialize with my peers. On the whole, they are an interesting, diverse and committed group of instructors. In community colleges, effective teaching holds priority over the publish or perish Sword of Damocles which hangs over professors in the hierarchical structure of universities. We are all "instructors" and do not compete for professorships; we are measured by how good a job we do in the classroom. The important question is: Have our students really advanced in their skills or knowledge levels by the time they complete our classes? In the democracy of an "open door" college, faculty must learn ways to translate academic knowledge into pragmatic information, for our older and nontraditional students are impatient with what they see as pedantry. As a result, most of the instructors I know may take delight in the poetry of W.H. Auden or the theories of Alfred North Whitehead in their private hours, but their teaching must make sense to the student and be relevant (that much over-used word) to the context of the situation. Community colleges rarely keep academic purists for long. Someone committed to teaching the third act of

"Hamlet" will be disenchanted quickly with the mixture of students we get, and the administration will be disenchanted quickly with the mixture of students we get, and the administration will be disenchanted with his or her specialization. One student may truly want to know, and be capable of learning how to analyze and synthesize literature or physics; another may only want to know and be capable of learning how to write a job application without embarrassment. The community college must serve both.

The kinds of instructors who stay are mostly a bright, realistic, flexible, philosophical, student-oriented group of people. They've come to terms with their own purist tendencies and are simply intellectuals who love to teach. Knowing them is, indeed, another plus; there are often good laughs over the coffee cups.

Then there is the larger community. When possible, I attend professional meetings for added information and stimulation. I gain new ideas, information and incentive for my sometimes starving mind and imagination from wide-ranging subjects: "Teaching Main Street in Minnesota in 1981," "Small Press Possibilities for Potential Publishers," "The Concept of Time in Four Quartets," "A Feminist Perspective on D.H. Lawrence," "How to Help Students with Writing Anxiety," "Differing Styles of Learning," or "Who Said Everyone Needs to Outline?" And the social interchange between committed college teachers from all over the country is a rich experience I do not want to discount.

As I continue to tally positives with negatives on my balance sheet, I cannot discount the students themselves. I do

not have any discipline problems that public school teachers must contend with -- another plus. I simply like my students. Here I must be careful; sentimentality is a real cop-out. I've heard too many pious teachers say, "The one thing that keeps me going is that one beautiful student I sometimes get." Hogwash! A lot of my students are not beautiful; a lot of them are not even interesting. But, on the other hand, a lot of them are. But I think it is the very diversity which keeps me motivated.

In the slice-of-life, inner-city college we get a wonderful mixture of age, economic and racial groups; there is enormous variation in I.Q.'s, motivations, goals. How can I reach the 45-year-old displaced homemaker and the 24-year-old ex-convict in the same classroom? And what about the young Black, the first in her family to go to college, who's sitting next to the international student who comes from wealthy aristocracy and the British school system? The traditional 18-year-old WASP, fresh out of high school, is in the minority. This rich potpourri keep me ever reaching for better teaching techniques -- and ever learning. The papers I get come from life experience, not from wishful thinking. I receive essays on everything from "The New Yam Festival in Nigeria," and "My Experience with Justice as a Native American in Prison," to "The Problems of Being a Forty Year Old Widow in a Youth Culture," or "The Joys of Beginning College after Sixty". No, there are few papers any more on either "Hamlet," or on "How to Change the Oil..." Effort has gone into most of the papers and the topics are surely more real than the ones I was getting in the '50s, or the ones I was writing in the '40s.

I find that these students are often deeply motivated to learn; they are not eighteen year olds, as I was, who went off to school because we were expected to "get an education" as we "got" a suit of clothes. They are in college because they want to be. I like them, and I also admire them. Many make real sacrifices in order to attend school, often juggling horrendous responsibilities with college assignments -- tasks that would stifle less sturdy souls.

Well, maybe I've written myself into being a cock-eyed optimist. And maybe, my paranoia tells me, I am letting myself be exploited by the budget concerns of the state. I hope not. I'm trying to take a clear-eyed look at whether or not to stay in teaching.

The tally seems to say that despite job insecurity and salary, I am committed to stay. The fact is that I genuinely love teaching; some sort of affinity pulls me back again and again. But if financial rewards (i.e., "comfort level" income) are not forthcoming, by next August (or December, March, or June), I'll have to reassess my goals again. Maybe by next year I'll decide that intellectual and emotional satisfactions are not enough.