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## My Freshman English Teacher

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# MY FRESHMAN ENGLISH TEACHER

*Jim Persoon*

He had a red birthmark on his cheek bigger than the one Gorbachev has on his head. He was from Mississippi and smiled a lot and said we were going to be reading some "im-POH-tant LIT-er-a-too-er." Not "litercher," as I said, but a genuine five-syllable aristocratic Southern word. I wish I could say I was entranced, but I was mostly scared. At least I could understand him most of the time, unlike my calculus professor from Korea and my chemistry section leader from Pakistan, and, worst of all, my zoology lab teacher from Texas.

John McCully was the son of a preacher man, he said, a Baptist minister, and he had never been in the North before, but he was happy to meet us. I was transferred out of his section the next week, into an honors section, based on an embarrassingly naive essay on the assigned topic of race in America, from someone who had never actually spoken to a black person. The next year, though still a pre-med student, I took a medieval literature course—God knows why. John taught it. He remembered me and relished my shock. I had expected to be safely anonymous at this midwestern mega-university, after the close emotional confines of the small farming community I had come from. I did not do well in his course. I got an incomplete. It was the end of the sixties, and a lot was going on, but that is not why I did not complete the course.

I just could not take it all in. At each class session, John would walk in with a stack of books too high to carry safely. They would often tumble out of his arms, fall open, and scatter the torn bits of yellow paper that served him as bookmarks. John would scramble to gather them up, stop to smile at us and apologize, and then scramble some more, say "oh, dear," smile, put his hand to his head with a distressed look and start telling us what he would have read to us if he could find the page. He was notoriously disorganized.

He also knew that he had something important to say, and I could tell that. Somewhere in this mess of books was a great richness, and it was this messy teacher who had read them. As for me, I had trouble reading them. I could follow John's reading of them, but I never knew what I was supposed to do about it all, what to write or what to say. So I didn't speak in class or write all the papers. I would go sit outside of John's office. There was a bench there. There was a bench in front of every office door, in a quiet hall, so anyone could sit for a long time and read without being disturbed and without feeling that we were disturbing anyone else. I still think of that profusion of benches as the ideal in university architecture. John might be in class and not due in the office for an hour, but I had the comforting bench by his door.

Inside the office was even better. There were books everywhere, and they all had bits of paper hanging out of them. He would grab an envelope out of the trash to

write down an idea, in a large, loopy handwriting that I tried to read upside-down. He had an office-mate with whom he argued all the time. I came into the office on any pretense. I could hardly articulate a question, but they didn't seem to mind. They would go on arguing some point I only half understood, and I would listen to the sound of this strange new talk which nobody talked where I came from. I was not a part of it; I couldn't speak it; I could barely write in imitation of it; but they let me listen in on it. For years. This was my undergraduate education, and, in some ways, it has been more powerful training than the Ph.D. ever could be.

One of my own undergraduate students called just this weekend before Christmas to ask about her A-minus. "I must have really bombed the final," she said without irony.

I've been thinking all week about my first Christmas at college. Bombs were falling at Hue. It was the Tet Offensive. I would be drafted in three years. I got an incomplete from John McCully in Medieval Literature; the next term it was due to turn into an F, and I still refused to write the last paper, because I still knew too little. John gave me a grade anyway, in defiance of my stubbornness and anxiety. I don't know if it was an A or an A minus, but it was totally undeserved.

He was a father to me. That is, I wanted to grow up to be like him. And he treated me with compassion, rather than according to my just desserts. I think I'm hipper than John, and I have more hair than he did. But I'm still trying to reach that level of devotion he showed to me, a debt I can repay only by passing it on to some other raw-boned, inarticulate kid who sits in my office not knowing what to say.

I want to end my story with an imagined moral from John's father, the Baptist minister. The Lord works in mysterious ways. Who knows what kind of teaching takes, or what kind of student takes it in, or what the whole reason for the enterprise is? But perform it with devotion, and, as Keats says, that is all you know and all you need to know.

John's devotion, not his messy technique, made him a teacher, and I was the outwardly unresponsive, unpromising student in whom it took. As I work on my own teaching techniques, which are an important source of creative effort and meaning for me, I want not to forget the heart of it all, and I want not too quickly to judge myself a success or failure by what I can see in student papers, voices, and attitudes. This is a deeper enterprise than that, always potentially transformative, and even with the unlikeliest of materials, as in the life-changing encounter between John and me.