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The Gift

Bob Gassen

On May 17, 2000, I entered the back door of Notre Dame High School in Harper Woods, Michigan, holding a paperback copy of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Although this book was faded and worn, held together with yellowed mending tape, it was in remarkably good condition, considering the service it had given to me. I had first used this book in 1965 as a senior at Notre Dame. Three years later, as an English major, I made use of the critical commentary at the back of the book while I studied Shakespearean tragedies. Then in 1976, I again used the reference works when studying Shakespeare as a graduate student in English. On numerous occasions, I have used this old Signet Classic *Hamlet* when teaching Introduction to Literature at Hutchinson Community College in Kansas. After teaching English for thirty years, I decided to give this book to Mr. Conrad Vachon, my senior English Teacher at Notre Dame. This book, along with a number of others that I had saved from high school, undergraduate work, and graduate study, meant much to me. To some extent, it was symbolic of my scholastic attainments, and I wanted to give this worn copy of *Hamlet*, one of the crowning achievements in the English language, to the man who had introduced me to the power of language.

If a young person is lucky, he becomes involved with the right adult at the right time.

At the end of my junior year, the dean of studies at Notre Dame asked me about my career plans. Although I had no career plans, I told him that I wanted to become a writer. English was one of the only courses in which I had earned a B grade. I enjoyed writing and put occasional effort into it. On the

strength of my remark to the dean and my B's in English, I ended up in one of Mr. Vachon's senior English classes with the smart kids, those who enrolled in fourth-year Latin and calculus and were prepping for colleges such as Brown, Boston College, and Michigan. My only impression of Mr. Vachon prior to my senior year was of a skinny guy with a hooked nose and an almost continual scowl, a no-nonsense teacher who walked quickly through the halls. He reminded me of a rooster wearing black, horn-rimmed glasses.

Conrad Vachon praised me once during my entire senior year of English. Before starting class one morning, he saw Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* on my desk. "You're reading *A Moveable Feast*: I'm impressed, Gassen." That was the only time he was impressed with me. What I didn't mention to Mr. Vachon was that, the day before, I was killing time in study hall, which was located in the library. While doodling in my notebook, I noticed a book with a multicolored dust jacket on one of the shelves and began reading it out of curiosity. Just before the end of the hour, I checked out *A Moveable Feast* and read it all. Hemingway made writing seem like such an adventure that I even wrote some of my essays for Mr. Vachon in a drugstore restaurant to imitate Hemingway's account of writing in restaurants. I didn't know who Hemingway was and had no recollection of reading any of his fiction, but at that time, I was only beginning to really care about anything.

If a young person is lucky, he becomes involved with the right adult at the right time. In my case, I was doubly lucky. As a cross country coach, Mr. Bill Raymond made me believe that mediocrity was my lot in life only if I allowed that to happen.

From him, I learned that if I wanted to excel as a runner, I would have to have the determination to win and put in the requisite hard work. As an English teacher, Mr. Vachon demonstrated what commitment and passion for a profession and a field of study really meant. In Mr. Vachon's classes, we didn't take study halls or discuss any issues not pertinent to the lesson at hand. Under him, we studied the craft of writing—such as formulating a thesis and improving verb density. We read and discussed such works as Sophocles' *Antigone*, *Beowulf*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*. We memorized John Donne's sonnet "Death, be not proud," Shakespeare's sonnet "That time of Year," and Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. I still remember sitting at an old formica kitchen table writing Donne's "Death, be not proud" sonnet over and over until I had, to use Mr. Vachon's phrase, "committed it to memory." At that time, I had no idea what this poem meant. It could just as well have been written in a foreign language. But what was important then was that I was beginning my apprenticeship in the profession of language. Several years later, I came to appreciate Donne's ingenious Italian sonnet, and a few years after that, I took an entire graduate course entitled Age of Donne. But I had memorized "Death, be not proud" in 1965, and to this day, I can recite it and the other poems that I memorized in Mr. Vachon's class.

As an English teacher, Mr. Vachon demonstrated what commitment and passion for a profession and a field of study really meant.

I'm not suggesting that requiring students to memorize a number of poems and read a voluminous amount of literature is a necessary characteristic of good English teaching. However, Conrad Vachon brought such intense passion and conviction to his teaching that I really didn't mind the work. In fact, years later, when preparing certain works of literature that I previously studied under Mr. Vachon for college classes that I was taking, I would hear his phrases and ideas echoing in my mind. When discussing Joseph Conrad's *Lord*

Jim in a college class, I remembered Conrad Vachon lecturing in the cafeteria while team teaching with Mr. Robert Kelly and Father Richard Cochran. His emphasis that Jim was "one of us" still reverberates in my memory. By the end of my senior year at Notre Dame, I knew that although I had a long way to go, I wanted to teach English like Mr. Vachon.

During the first semester of my freshmen year at college, my mother sent me an article about Mr. Vachon as the new coach of the Notre Dame cross country team. I knew that Coach Raymond had taken a sabbatical to study at Arizona State University and was wondering who would coach cross country. When I read the article, I scoffed at the idea of Conrad Vachon being a coach. I should have known that he would put forth the same passion and commitment to coaching that he put into teaching English. As a student at Notre Dame, I dedicated myself to running. Coincidentally, when I went to college, I channeled that dedication into the study of English, and Conrad Vachon dedicated much of his energy into coaching cross country and track, eventually producing championship teams and nationally renowned runners. Perhaps it is just as well that Mr. Vachon began coaching the year after I left Notre Dame. I don't think that I could have dealt with such intensity both in the classroom and on the track.

As I passed through the gym and began walking down the main hallway, I looked into the room where I had Mr. Vachon for senior English. Further on, I approached a faculty member walking in the opposite direction. "Excuse me, I'm looking for Mr. Vachon." He gave me a solemn look before telling me that Mr. Vachon had recently passed away.

Before leaving, I spoke briefly with the principal, Father John Sajdak, about Mr. Vachon. As I walked out the back door, still holding the book I had intended to give Mr. Vachon, I remembered Horatio's famous line to the dead Hamlet: "Good night, sweet/Prince,/and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

About the Author

Bob Gassen, free-lance writer and frequent contributor of articles to professional journals, teaches composition and literature at Hutchinson Community College in Hutchinson, Kansas.