

Spring Pedagogy

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Dogwoods were blooming, the daffodils were just about wilting, the sky was azure, and the Virginia Tech shootings had just shaken us all, students and professors alike. Blocks away from the site of the former World Trade Center, I sat in a stuffy basement classroom with a group of remedial writing college students from all over New York City. Some of these students had overcome obstacles that most people can't even dream up to be sitting there that day. To say that I loved being their professor, to say that I just wanted them to write a cohesive paragraph and move on, to say that they inspired me, all of this is understatement.

Out of a class that by the end of the term was down to about 20, three had lost their mothers in the previous 12 months, one just three months prior to that sweet spring day, another just six months before. Both of these were beautiful young women but quite different in aspect. One was bold but defeated looking with dull eyes. The other was small, shy, wide-eyed and luminous. They shared the same pain, a hurt that no child should feel, one that is unfathomable. But it was finally spring in a semester that had started with freezing January wind blasting off the Hudson, burning our ears and our faces. Now, we were sleepy and suffering from spring fever, and that is how it all started.

To break the end-of-the-semester monotony, I used to give the class short, enjoyable exercises that I would use later in the day to jump-start my upper-level creative writing class. On this morning, I gave the class Wordsworth's 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud', except that I deleted some of the words, so the students could fill in the blanks to create their own poems, sort of Mad-libs with the Romantics. We got as far as 'a host of golden daffodils' when the hands went up. They didn't know what a daffodil was, and their dictionaries had not yielded much information that would allow them to visualise. I was a bit stunned. I looked at these eager faces, and a few-not-so-eager, and one or two with the eye-rolling look that meant, 'What, are you kidding? Those flowers on the corner at the deli', and decided we needed to just get moving. I thought of my dear mother, gone now five years, and her beautiful trumpeting daffodils that bloomed every Easter. Then I thought about her protracted illness and our having to sell our family home to move her near my sister and me, so we could see her comfortably to her last hour. I looked at the two motherless girls sitting next to one another in the back of the classroom. One was dishevelled, downcast and ashen; the other was neatly groomed, dressed in white, brown skin shimmering, small and sad. We needed to get out, out into the spring sunshine, out into the blue.

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I told the students to grab their backpacks. We were going for a walk to find some daffodils, to use our senses to make some word pictures. A few stayed behind, but the ones who came, well, my heart, my heart; they gave me such heart that semester. I needed it for I was mourning, too. I was recovering from my divorce from my true love, who turned out to be not so true.

The students and I headed down the stairs of the campus (one of the largest, public, urban colleges in the country) to a small park nearby. There were formal flowerbeds in the park, a playground, a gazebo and some trees in full-flower. Dogwood, I guess. I brought my students to the first flowerbed and told them to close their eyes and just listen. There was a lot of 'I don't hear anything but traffic', until a low-flying bird flew right past their heads! I mean, almost skimming their ears.

One or two of my students jumped. One of my more challenged writers murmured, 'A bird flew by'. I asked him how he knew. He said that he just knew. One of my sweet young women said, 'I heard it flap its wings. I really heard a bird flap its wings!' She must have heard pigeons flap their wings before, as all New Yorkers have, but we sort of look upon pigeons as flying rats, so that didn't count to her or to the rest of us. This was a bird, a 'real' bird.

One of the young men said, 'Yo, Miss, that's for real. I could hear the wings, too'.

Another said, 'No, I heard a squeaking sound.'

Another, a great guy to whom I used to sing 'Johnny Angel' all the time said, 'No that wasn't a squeak. Whatcha think? It was mouse? That was some kind of little chirp from down his throat somewhere.' I know it sounds weird that I would sing 'Johnny Angel' to a student in a college classroom, but that semester I would do anything to get them to write, even a Flamenco dance. For real.

Since I've always believed that the best way to teach writing is to start with sensory details, I had them compose a sentence together, out loud. It started with, 'A bird flew by.'

I asked, 'How do you know it did if you had your eyes closed?' One said, 'I knew a bird flew by 'cause I heard its wings flap.' Another said, 'Not so hard flapping, though.'

'Okay, more, let's say more.'

One student shouted, 'Miss, Miss, get some paper. I'll write it down.' And so they began and built up to, 'By the gentle flapping of its wings and the throaty chirp, I knew, even though I couldn't see, that a bird was flying past me in the sunshine.' There it was; all semester I tried to teach descriptive writing, and here at the very end, right before the big, final exit exam, the most wondrous sentence of all.

But this, however, is not the most important part of the best teaching experience of my life. The best part was probably the most profound, and sometimes things profound are hard to write about, and I didn't even get to the daffodil part yet.

We walked along in a little park in Lower Manhattan, just north of where the World Trade Center used to be, and the sky was the same blue as that awful day, and the daffodils were wilted and brown. We came upon a gorgeous grove of flowering trees with full-blown white clusters of delicate blossoms. The class knew just what to do. They were quiet; some stopped and closed their eyes. Some just felt the varied textures; others just sat. A few climbed the trees and hung upside down from their sturdy boughs. I could see several mothers and nannies giving them dirty looks, but the students were oblivious.

Throughout our journey, I had modelled behaviour that is part of my writing process: smelling things, feeling grass, lying flat on a park bench to look upward

through the flowering bowers to the patches of blue above. The students looked at me with interest. There I was exhausted, dressed in a business suit, stretched out on this park bench looking heavenward. I thought of my mother, my mother who, a child of the Depression, could not go to college, but nonetheless, gave me the gift of words. I could feel her there with me. She was so kind and loving and loved words and children. I looked over to see my small, shy, motherless child looking at me intently. The students noticed, too, as she approached me tentatively. She wanted to try it, to lie flat on her back and float into the blossoms. We could all see it. I got up, and some of the other young women in the class, and Johnny Angel, surrounded her. I whispered to her, 'Go do what I did. Stretch out on the bench and just look up at the flowers and the sunshine coming through.'

More encouragement from the class. She asked, 'Professor, I'm scared. Will you sit next to me?' I did. Everyone was silent as she took her place on the bench. She lay down with one hand clutching tightly to the edge as though she were holding onto a life raft in the middle of the storm-tossed Hudson. I asked her if she would like me to support her so she could relax. She said that she would. I put my arm around her shoulders to cradle her and whispered that sometimes when I see something beautiful I talk to my mother. She asked if she could do the same and if her mother could hear her. I couldn't lie to her, so I told her *my* truth: I believe my mother can hear me when I speak to her, especially through something so beautiful. I told her, however, that she'd have to try it and decide for herself.

The entire class was still. We could hear the children nearby sifting sand in the sandbox, the nannies chattering and a guy jogging around us micromanaging on his cell phone. Eventually the whole class encircled this beautiful, brave child. I held her fast and helped her breathe deep breaths and told her to float, and as I did, I felt my mother's presence suffuse *my* soul. Then I felt this woman-child's body relax, as she floated into the filtered sunlight and the sweet spring blossoms. It was at that moment that I knew that I had taught lessons that day that my mother had taught me, lessons that could not be found in any curriculum or on any syllabus. My students and I learned the unquantifiable that day. Nothing can replace one who is lost, nothing can ever fill the place in the heart left vacant by love lost, but sometimes in spring, if only for a moment or two, your heart can have amnesia, and you can find yourself again in a cluster of white blossoms.

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