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Connecting

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Carl Vandermeulen

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CONNECTING

Trust, and Gaps

Helen Walker

Let's consider what is next to impossible to practice with any regularity: *trust*. We open the door with our hair brushed, zippers checked, brief cases bulging with the results of a pedagogy developed out of deep passion and forethought based on experience and study. Yet we know that no amount of preparation will take care of the contingencies created by who we open our doors to: students.

Whatever we plan for, students will surprise us, turning the classroom into a stage where our performance demands trust.

Since I teach playwriting this semester, and since I keep finding evidence of trust in the narratives I receive for "Connecting," I will expand on the theater analogy. A good playwright creates a good play by setting up gaps. A gap is the space between expectation and reality. For example, a teacher enters a classroom, expecting to teach her students well, but she soon meets reality in the form of obstacles—a widely diverse array of students, some eager to learn but many others resistant, or worse, apathetic. The space after expectation and reality collide is the gap.

Here comes the good news. These gaps (reoccurring again and again in a good play) are the spaces in which a protagonist does the hard work of bringing together expectation and reality. In theater, without the gaps, the play dies. In the classroom, without the gaps, the teacher gets no opportunity to know and then show what she and her students are made of. Everyone goes home disappointed. So in the gap, marshaling the energy that comes from the conflict between expectation and reality, the teacher reaches out for her goal, using a "tactic" (another playwriting term). If she fails, she tries another. And so it goes, on and on. The drama and the tension come from the teacher trusting that she will find a tactic that awakens the desire in every student to learn. Not all tactics will work for all students. It takes trust, however, that the right tactics can be found.

Interesting analogy, isn't it? Maybe our classrooms are even more gap-filled than good theater, scene after scene after scene without a let up. Carl Vandermeulen's poem, below, is what got me thinking about trust. How trusting we must be to navigate through our teaching in "a way/ that is not a way/ until [we] make it."

As I close—so that you can read Carl's poem and then get a glimpse into other teachers' classrooms—I hope you will become mindful about the gaps these teachers reveal. The gaps are pretty much guaranteed when people get together in confined spaces to learn. The trust that we can fill those gaps, that we can reconcile expectation and reality? Well, that's another thing altogether! That's where, in our classrooms, our efforts stretch us into the role of the protagonist—or not.

I just got an image of me as my personal favorite protagonist, Spider Man, jumping off a very tall building with my eyes closed for a second, trusting that the webs I shoot out of my fingertips will hold me up and connect me to something real.

Happy reading!

Proverbs for Poetry Class

Carl Vandermeulen

If you are assigned to write a poem,
work till the poem works free
from the assignment.

Follow instructions and advice,
knowing that instructions
and advice do not write poems.

If you write desiring this woman's art
and that man's scope,
your poems as well will reject you.

If you write in fear, poems that wait to welcome you
will smell your fear and show their teeth,
and if you make effigies of your fears,
others will madly shape their own—
a pack of masks consorting in wind and shadow
begetting offspring none claim as their own.

You cannot catch a cat by chasing it, but if you wait
open-handed, it may come to you
and show you what you need to know
about touch and shape and sound.

Trust that you will learn
to go by a way
that is not a way
until you make it.

TJ, Whom I Like Very Much

Louise Morgan

(Part of an email a while back from my teacher friend Louise, telling me about her day of teaching in an alternative high school in Harrisburg, PA):

. . . Well, I am getting my drama section off the ground today. Here is what I did. When they walked into the room, they were given two things. A handshake by me and

a card with an emotion written on it. I asked them to sit in alphabetical order with that emotion. After they sat down, I told them we were going to learn about some elements of drama—emotion and script to begin with. So I asked them to write a very short script. To pick one line from anything—a song, a rap. Then I put the emotion cards in a box and the script in a box. I picked out the cards. I spoke the words with the emotion and asked them to guess the emotion. We talked about how some of the emotions did not go with the words and some did. I did several of those and then asked them to try. Some did.

Next I talked about how arts are used to express emotion and experience, and then I read a poem. A 15-year-old boy wrote it. It is about hiding yourself from others.

They didn't get into it at first. It took about 10 minutes for them to overcome all the junk that keeps them from trusting, involving and sharing. They finally started to laugh, or get interested. Some didn't, just stayed in a dark cloud.

One of them, TJ, whom I like very much, who smiles a lot, is never disrespectful, was picked up for rape. He broke into a house and raped a 32-year-old at gun point. What do you do with that? He is in Dauphin County prison. This will be the second boy that I am going to write to in prison.

All for now.....

History Lesson 101

Jill Moyer Sunday

I heard Joe before I ever saw him. Late on a Wednesday afternoon, I sat in my office, hunched over a pile of papers as the clock pushed toward five, rushing to finish a set of responses for my morning composition class. In the background, Joe's high, reedy voice rose and fell in conversation with a professor from another department.

I refocused on the papers in front of me. Seconds later another conversation began . . . this time between Joe and one of my colleagues, just two doors away. If I pulled the door closed right then, before he came any closer, he wouldn't know the difference. I quietly moved the door into its frame.

The next morning, I rounded the bend from my office to my classroom, coming face to face with a short, trim man, his white hair cropped in military style. This had to be Joe.

Gesturing at the professional-looking camera hanging around his neck, Joe identified himself as a graduate of our university, on campus to attend his 50th reunion. "I'm taking pictures for the Coast Guard auxiliary newsletter. Would I be able to visit your classroom?" I led Joe into room 321, my conscience slightly assuaged about last night's closed door.

Joe told me a little about himself while we waited for students to settle in. After WWII, he'd come to our university via the G.I. Bill; the changes on campus since then amazed him. "I didn't recognize the place," he said, as much to himself as to me.

"It's a coincidence that you're here today," I told Joe, just before he walked to the back of the classroom. "We've been reading and writing about WWII, the Holocaust really. They've just been to the Holocaust Museum on Monday."

We began class by discussing their visit to the museum. I asked them which exhibit took the Holocaust from historical notation to reality for them. They told each other about

piles of old shoes, covered with a blue patina of mold; about the boxcar, some hesitating to enter, some offering a prayer as they walked through; about the pictures drawn by children, the recordings of survivors, the silence of visitors. All of them mentioned the Tower of Faces, stretching upward for three floors of the museum, four walls covered with photos of the Jews of Eishishok, taken before a SS mobile death squad obliterated the entire population in just 48 hours. The photographs, submitted to the local Nazi regime for tallying purposes, are poignant signs of ordinary life stopped short—graduation and wedding shots, babies' birthdays, families picnicking on summer lawns.

This may have been the most difficult class of the semester, as students confronted the reality of human betrayal. Our journey through the semester would eventually take us to a brighter place, in our research of people and organizations that worked against oppression. But on this day, we still had to view a film clip from *Sophie's Choice*. (If you haven't seen the movie or read the book, William Styron's beautiful mix of American naïvité and the residual effects of the Holocaust, put it on your list). The clip shows Sophie's arrival at Auschwitz with her two young children. In a desperate plea, Sophie tells an SS officer that she's a not a Jew, but a Polish Christian. He responds by offering her the "choice" of which child will be allowed to live. The clip ends with Sophie's little girl screaming for her mother as the officer carries her away under his arm.

The room was quiet. I turned on the lights and honored the silence for a bit. "Well?" I asked. "Let's put this all together. Reactions?"

"It could have been me," one of the students shared.

"It could have been any of us. What if my father were a Nazi? Would I have been able to stand up to him?"

"May I say something?" Joe asked from the back of the room. The students seemed to have forgotten him. One or two turned toward him. "I was eighteen years old," Joe began. "I was there."

The change in the classroom was physical. Every student—the majority of them just eighteen—moved as if part of a rippling wave building momentum, adjusting their seats to look directly at Joe. "My unit went to Auschwitz. We were one of the first at the camp." Joe said. "It was...it was..." Joe continued with a sob, raising his hands to cover his face, and the rest of his story became wet words wept into his hands.

In that moment, history came alive in my classroom. Movie images faded away, and Joe stood at the gates of Auschwitz.

His presence was still in our classroom when we met again. The students wrote about him, and many stopped by my office to discuss his visit. I told his story over and over again, knocking on colleagues' doors. I could sense their withdrawal when I began my story, hearing: "Oh, that guy. I heard him in the hall too." Some told me they had also closed their doors, anxious not to be disturbed. But when I told them about Joe's role in the liberation of Auschwitz, their faces changed, softening.

As for me, I will likely still be rushing to finish a stack of papers, but Joe's visit will stay with me for a long time. What did I learn from him? Sometimes history breathes. I'm keeping my door wide open now, just in case.

Shawn

Tony Mayo

For many, Johnny Cash is “the man in black.” For me, Shawn will forever be the man in black. This Metallica-obsessed, grunge-looking genius is a savant clad as a hair band roadie. Shawn defies first impressions and conquers history in defiance of his track record as a slacker and chronic pot smoker. He has snuck up on me and his own education: a ninja assassin, academically lethal, clad in the color of night.

The word, “teacher” implies wisdom. A teacher teaches others, molds minds, and influences those willing to learn. I was thirty-two. Shawn was fourteen. Shawn was my teacher; all this in spite of the long hair, the smell of teen spirit, and the aroma of marijuana.

Shawn taught me to never make assumptions about a student based on hair, musical interest, “recreational habits,” clothes, or previous academic failures. True, after years of experience and education, these are things I should have known, and probably did deep down, but Shawn was a stark real-world reminder. Shawn has credited me with allowing him to express and demonstrate his brilliance. He has said I inspired him to want to try. What Shawn fails to realize is that I was only able to do so once he inspired me.

This head-banging denizen shared an art room where we discussed World History. But our dialogue was not limited to the school setting. Shawn travels well, stealthily blindsiding museum guides on field trips with critical questions, illuminating tour groups with intricate knowledge of Renaissance art and medieval history. Shawn makes black bright.

We taught each other well, but I know that in our symbiosis I am the remora and he is the shark. I now listen to Metallica. I have done more good because this dark knight slew the dragon of ignorance within me years ago. Through social media posts, I still see the beacon within this man in black when he comments on things with historical references. I take it as a wink and a nudge and smile, hear guitar riffs in my imagination, and vow to continue to connect with men in black, purple-haired girls, and all who are pierced, painted, tattooed, or outside the box. And I always light the darkness with my smile if any one of them is wearing a Metallica tee shirt.