

"The Farming of a Verse": Self-Disclosure in the Classroom

Most faculty can recall all too easily moments of unplanned self-revelation in the classroom and the feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability that accompanied these moments. This narrative explores the author's experiences with self-disclosure in the classroom and how these experiences have transformed her and her students.

by
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When I had been teaching for two years, one of the graduate students in my seminar gave me a Christmas card thanking me for the class and offering a little unsolicited advice. "Share more of your personal experience," she wrote. "The two times you did I learned more than I learned the rest of the semester." My first response was to shudder, both at her assessment of the course and at the memory of my unplanned outbursts of self-revelation.



Still, the advice stayed with me, though I continued to enact the professorial role that had been modeled by my teachers: as a professor one was aggressively well-informed, up-to-date on other people's ideas, and able to guide students through a complex pattern of abstract concepts to arrive at a degree that granted them the authority to guide their students through similar patterns in the same fashion. Good students, the ones who completed their

degrees, were safe students: they understood the rules of impersonal professionalism, abided by them conscientiously, and if they ever rebelled, they did so in private, out of the classroom and away from their word processors. I had been such a good student that I had never said anything self-revealing in class. Yet now, as a professor, I found myself doing just that. I felt frightened, both by the revelations themselves and by the ways they occurred. It was as if another force resided in me, one that was determined to bring forth these personal stories in spite of my best efforts to contain them. Adding to my alarm was the fact that my students were demanding more. Clearly they wanted something human, solid, and relevant in their education.

I had been given an assignment: I was being asked to use my personal experience to communicate more significantly with my students. I wanted to learn to be less fearful about doing so. I needed to think more about the stories I might tell that would help the students understand and apply concepts in the humanities curriculum to their concrete lives, and help the students tell their own stories as well. The challenge tumbled

around in my brain: I find that pedagogy, like other creative work, benefits from half-conscious mulling, and I knew I'd find myself in a situation that required me to act on the mulling all too soon.

And so the first day of the next semester found me walking to class with my usual first-day nerves—heart pounding in my shoulders, my neck, my ears, and my scalp. I was cool, though, prepared and experienced enough to know that the tension would dissipate once I got into class and exerted my authority by going over the syllabus. But when I walked into the classroom and started to talk,

my voice cracked. Who was cool? My opening speech vanished, I dropped thirty copies of the syllabus on the floor, and I saw the semester looming ahead: Dr. Incompetent trying to recover her students' respect.

So I did what many teachers do when non-plussed: I began to chatter. And the result was another outburst: "I can't believe I still get nervous the first day of class. I guess we all do. I remember—" and suddenly a shower of memories cooled me off — "I remember my Shakespeare professor, a terrific teacher who had been teaching the same course for twenty years, telling me that he was *always* nervous the first day, and that he had decided that

was just the way it was going to be. So he'd walk into class and with his incredibly smooth Cary Grant voice, read the opening of *Romeo and Juliet*, getting us in the mood for the drama and giving himself a chance to breathe. Oh, and then there was the department chair in my graduate program. The first year I was a Teaching Assistant he came to our teacher training the day before classes began to encourage us and make us confident teachers. He was a really popular

professor, very nice and smart and famous, and his encouragement went like this: 'Let me just tell you,' he said, 'your first day is going to be nerve-racking, but it's going to be better than my first day of teaching.' He hung

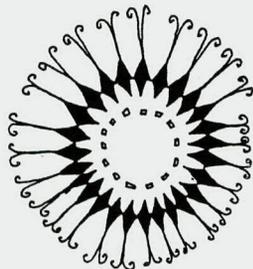
fire, and we waited eagerly, remembering that he had just won the university's outstanding professor award. He grinned at us and said, 'On my first day of class, I walked in, looked at all the students—and threw up.'" My class broke into laughter and I felt at ease, continuing my introduction to the course with confidence.

Still, as I reviewed the day, doubts about my confession of nervousness lingered. I wondered about the ways in which this kind of disclosure might affect the students. Would they think I was incompetent? Would they think the class was lightweight and therefore not take it seriously? Or could my admission of fear possibly en-

able my students to engage in the material of the course more fully? The memory of my Shakespeare professor brought forth memories of other teachers who had shared significant personal experiences. I realized that by telling stories of their own experiences, my mentors had given me a model of professorial confession that I wanted to emulate, but couldn't quite achieve. Their stories, I realized, were always about their successful liberation from fear.

There was Donald Pateron, the gruff professor of music who directed the Sage Chapel Choir at Cornell when I was an undergraduate. He talked in a terrifying bark, and when I had to go to his office to audition for a small group performance, I was afraid I would collapse in tears before I sang even one note. At last it was my turn, and he called me in and asked me to sing a few scales. I had no air; my voice was flat and weak. "That's it," I thought, bracing myself. "He's not only going to say I can't be in the small choir, but that really I shouldn't be in the big one either, that my flat voice makes the second soprano section sound bad."

But instead Professor Pateron sat down on the piano bench and began to talk. "I remember when I was a graduate student and had to give my final recital. To me, everything rested on this one performance. I thought that if I played well, I'd graduate with honors and get a good job; if I played poorly, I would not only be humiliated, I would probably not get any job



at all." He smiled at the absurdity of his fear. "But I had to give the recital, so I put on my tuxedo and read through the music one more time (we had to play from memory, of course) and walked out on stage. The stage was lit, but the seats were dark, and I couldn't see anyone, not the professors who would judge me nor my friends who would applaud me—no one, just darkness. I sat down at the piano, took a deep breath, and jumped out of my skin when a voice called out of the darkness, 'No mistakes!'"

A horrified laugh burst out of me, taking my nervousness with it. "Mad as hell," Paterson continued, "I played the best I've ever played in my life. And I vowed that I was never going to inflict such agonizing pressure on any of my students." He turned to me. "Want to try those scales again?" That story opening up my lungs, I sang the best I've ever sung.

And then I remembered the story one of my professors had told me about his mentor. When Yale was still a men's college, back in the 1960s, the emotional elements of everyday life were as likely to be ignored or aggressively vented as to be transformed into helpful or meaningful experiences. It was, therefore, with some shock that I learned from one of my professors, a Yale graduate, that the introductory Shakespeare class was one of the most popular courses on campus during the Vietnam War. "Why?" I asked. "Was it easy?" "No, not at all. It was because of Maynard Mack, the professor." I had met

Professor Mack, and thought he was very intelligent and witty, so I thought I saw why the young men had flocked to his course: New Critical interpretations of Shakespeare have a beautiful and satisfying precision, like mathematics. But that wasn't why the course was so popular, as it turned out. My teacher went on about his teacher: "Maynard was never afraid of feeling. When Lear saw Cordelia dead, Maynard made us see and hear and feel Lear's grief. When Cleopatra placed the asp on her breast, we all reached forward to try and save her and felt the sting of futility in the act. When Caliban described the music of the island, we listened to our world with different ears. And when Henry's soldiers fell at Agincourt, we wept for them and for all soldiers." And tears were in his eyes twenty years



later. "The class," he said, "was fondly called 'Tears at Two.'"

In graduate school I took a seminar with a preeminent professor. It was *fashionable* to take a course with this man, even if you weren't in his literary field, since you could then declare that you had studied with him and thereby claim intellectual status at any univer-

sity. The first day, our seminar was a little odd. We met briefly and talked about "To His Coy Mistress," a *carpe diem* poem that, true to convention, urges the addressee to seize the life she has and live it utterly, fully, recklessly even, because death lurks everywhere. After the discussion of the concept and the ramifications of "seizing the day," the professor asked us to meet at his home from then on, and that if we were ill, even with a cold, would we please not come to class as he was recovering from pneumonia and needed to avoid germs.

This was 1985, before such a request was a code recognized by us all. But as the semester progressed and our witty, loving, and intellectually demanding professor wasted away in front of us, one by one we realized that he was dying, fast, and that in the process of dying he was teaching English Renaissance Literature as specified on the syllabus, and also how to live bravely and generously. When he died, shortly after the semester ended, the funeral he had planned was a last gift, a final affirmation, a mass sung in Greek that led us beyond the words we could not understand to a plane of feeling—of grief turning into hope, and of loss becoming wisdom—that has made me able to value the weighty gift the dying leave the living.

These stories, all experienced and told by men, felt like gifts to me when I heard them as a student and when I recalled them years later. I believe that those professors really were free

of fear when they told their stories, and their courage inspired me. But while I wanted to tell similar stories—well, *I* was still afraid. Talking personally about myself in class felt like a leap into the dark, where I might be exposed and left hanging in the wind. Nevertheless, I kept finding myself taking that leap against my own will. I began to think that I needed to change my attitude, not my behavior.

My first effort toward that end was enacted in a course on English poetry. Every semester for several years, I made myself read a particular poem aloud to the class early in the term. I found it difficult to do and I did it because it was difficult—it seemed to me that poetry often expresses the emotions we don't dare articulate any other way, the deepest and most basic feelings. So, when I came to W. H. Auden's beautiful elegy for the poet William Butler Yeats, written at the beginning of the Second World War, I thought of "Tears at Two" and forced myself to permit myself to cry in class:

*Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;*

*With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;*

*In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how
to praise. (p.134)*

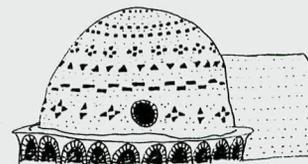
Semester after semester I felt embarrassed wiping away my tears and wondered if it was serving any purpose to show my emotion in class. But I believed it could be: Auden described the emotional and political power of poetry in words that apply to storytelling in the classroom as well. Stories can be voices that liberate us, they can transform conflict into knowledge, they can reveal strength.

Before reading the poem, I would always tell my students, "This poem gets me," which made the reading a self-conscious performance with a highly staged quality—a control that, I realized, was reassuring and made me feel safe. It was very similar to the model I had observed in the men who were my mentors. Thinking about staging a liberation from fear, I recalled the rest of that first day of the Shakespeare class years before. I had begun to tell stories deliberately. Having made the students laugh about the successful professor literally spilling his guts, I had been able to craft the segue: "And *that* always reminds me of the scene in Truffaut's *The Last Metro*, when Catherine Deneuve's character throws up right before walking on stage to give the performance of her life. All this is to say that performance is scary, and that nerves can turn into creative energy—and in this class, when you have to read aloud or act out a scene from one of the plays, you need to accept that nervousness and make it work for you, okay?"

With that idea in mind, I continue to struggle to become

less afraid, to be more personal; last semester in the poetry class, I was reading a poem called "Divorce," by David Mason. I had one more stanza to read when I felt my voice tremble and my eyes fill with tears. "You idiot!" part of my brain said to the other part. "Of course you are going to cry over this one, being in the midst of a divorce yourself!" I wobbled through to the end and immediately began to mock myself, telling the class, "Can you believe this? I didn't know I was going to blubber! Believe me, I don't *always* cry in class." On and on I went, apologizing for my display of feeling. I felt utterly exposed and naked and was covering up by knocking myself. The students were silent, some looking away from me in embarrassment, others looking at me with sympathy. I finished the class session without referring to the poem.

The next week I collected students' journals. One woman had written me a note: "I was scared of this class because I don't know anything about poetry. I told my friend about your crying in class the other day and he said you're the person to take the class with, since poetry moves you. And you do make it come alive, make me care about the feelings the poems express."



accomplished poet herself, stayed behind after class and said, "I'm glad you got choked up over that poem. We need to see that." Later in the semester she read a love poem by Pablo Neruda, first in Spanish and then in English. When she finished, the class sat motionless, silent, absorbing the love she had laid before us: Neruda's, hers, our own.

I think my sense of self-disclosure will always be marked by ambivalence, quite different from the model I saw when I was in college. That

model, the staged success story, is a very effective tool for encouraging students to try new and difficult things. But for me, the liberation-from-fear success story is only part of a bigger story: it's one of the numerous steps we need to make in our quest to understand ourselves and connect with other people. The further we go on the quest, the more we have to risk—and the closer we become.

When poems surprise me into such intense feeling that I cry, and I let people see my tears, I continue to feel afraid,

vulnerable. But showing my vulnerability seems to make other people willing and able to show theirs; when that happens in a classroom, my students and I experience the delicate wisdom of what it means to be human.

□

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