

The New Teacher

What Will Students Remember?

JIM BURKE

Last year, my first year as a teacher, I sat at a table with several colleagues while we wrestled with a question put to us by a guest speaker:

What do you think your students will remember of your class in 20 years? It is a daunting question for any teacher, but especially for one who is just beginning his career. I felt like a rookie ballplayer standing in the dugout, who has yet to get to bat. The rookie is unable to worry about what his fans will remember of him; he focuses solely on getting his first hit.

Yet it is a profound question. After nights spent charting the shifting course

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of your class, including days when you have watched your students scoff at pearls of wisdom, you wonder just what it is that they walk away with. What memory from Mr. Burke's sophomore English class will accompany them through the years?

Since my student days outnumbered my far fewer days as a teacher, the question forced me to recall my own teachers. More than any other, I

thought about Ken Kitchener, my freshman English teacher. I had long realized that I would not have become a teacher if our paths had not crossed. But what did I remember of what he taught me? Mostly I remembered the man. At a time when I worried most about the respect and opinion of my peers, here was a man who wore his hair long, who talked about the night jobs he had held as a janitor to finance his education, who had the courage to talk to us of his poetry. I hid my own poetry in the back of one of my speakers, scared to death someone might find out I wrote poems.

Another class I thought about was high school photography. In this cherished course, I learned about the art of manipulating images. But the teacher, Alan Haynes, offered me so much more. Seeing me swept up in enthusiasm, he'd invite me and another student to his house to share his work. He would talk to us about his art and passion for the beautiful. But when we drove home late, it was not photography that I thought about so much as that there were things in this world that one could feel passionate about, and make a living from, too, perhaps finding in this work a rich, fulfilling life.

Last, I thought of a professor I had at Santa Barbara—Frank McConnell. By the time I was in my last quarter of a degree in Developmental Psychology, all I could think about was James Joyce and my need to write. I needed an English class, and ended up spending my Thursday evenings with a man who alternated between a cigarette and a pipe, which he sometimes put into his pocket still lit, continuing to rant and rave about literature, while a stream of fragrant smoke followed him back and forth across the room. More than anyone, this man baptized me into the beauty and power of words. Yet when I

remember him, it is not his insistence that Eliot's *Wasteland* was "the greatest goddam piece of literature ever written"—an exhortation he made as we began every new work—but rather his telling us about the larger world out there, the places where he had traveled and lived, all the while doing something he loved. He said he could imagine no greater life than to be an English teacher, for it meant that he simply got paid for doing something he would do anyway—read and write.

It was not long after McConnell's class ended that I graduated and departed for North Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer. In many ways the North Africans I met there have become noble ghosts who accompany me through my days. Their rich voices come to me at odd hours, sometimes to inform me, other times to chide me.

That is why, when asked what my students would remember of me, I wrote down nothing more than "my voice." For that, I believe, is what is remembered most. Not the voice saying, "An appositive is a . . .," but the voice urging them on, saying "You know things," "You matter," "You taught me something today."

Thus it was that I stepped through that first classroom door as a teacher with trepidation and fear, exhilaration and awe.

I understood that it was a daunting task: to make mine a voice that would accompany my students through the years, to get them where they were going, to help them realize where they wanted to go. All the while, in my head I heard the voices of my own private ghost-angels, and found myself hoping I might someday be worthy of such gratitude as I have for those teachers, whose lessons seem distant and vague, but whose voices are near and precious. □

Jim Burke teaches English at Castro Valley High School, 19400 Santa Maria Ave., Castro Valley, CA 94546.

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