

Stories Against the Grain—A Last Hurrah

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This San Diego convention [April, 1993] marks the last of 23 consecutive CCCC conventions for me and the last professional talk of my career. I want it to be fun for me and, I hope, for those who hear or read it. So I've decided to do a retrospective through stories, stories that mix the personal and professional and, inevitably, the political. I'm glad to say they're all stories with happy endings. Some of them may even have a moral.

I'll begin with a prologue that dates back to my undergraduate days at the University of Michigan. In the four years I spent at Michigan getting my undergraduate degree in English, I never had a single woman professor—not one. I never even *saw* a woman professor—not in the English department, not in history or philosophy or psychology, and certainly not in any of my science and math courses. Probably there were some in home economics—I don't know. I do know that their absence in English was no accident. Chairman Louis Bredvold proclaimed loudly and often that he didn't want any damned women teaching in his department—they belonged in high school.

Predictably then, it never occurred to me that I, who had always relished school, might be a college professor. I went off to a menial magazine job in New York, not serious about any kind of career, and, as Betty Friedan has said, "with no vision of myself beyond 21." I still haven't forgiven the University of Michigan for denying me role models, but in retrospect there's a bright side to the story. A year and a half out of college I married a farmer, had children, and began to live a life where the important concerns of the day were how much it had rained, whether a cow was pregnant, and when you should harvest the corn. I helped doctor calves for screw worms, put up hay, hauled cotton to the

gin, and made a thousand trips to town for tractor parts. It's not intellectually stimulating—and that's what sent me back to graduate school—but it does give one a pretty earthy, pragmatic perspective and makes it hard to take academic fads and feuds very seriously. That anchor in reality has served me well.

There are other reasons I'm glad I waited until I was 41 and my children were well along in school before starting on my Ph.D. I think I did better work than I would have at 23, trusted my intuition more and graduate advisors less, and had more confidence in my tastes and my judgment. I also had the discipline and determination to get me through a dissertation.

But beyond the benefits to me, I think at an important time in higher education I was one of those who demonstrated that women have different rhythms to their lives and that's a positive, not a negative fact. Women who come back to school after having done something quite different for 10 years or more return with energy, excitement, and a good deal of common sense. They know what they want and are not shy about asking for it. The life experiences they bring with them allow them to get more out of their studies and make the classrooms they're in richer for everybody. I hope they don't, as I did, get male graduate advisors who tell them that women over 30 never do significant work, but if such women do they're likely to respond as I did and say, "Nonsense! I'm just getting started." If anything, such women do better work after 40 or 50 or 60 because they're not burned out. Look at Win Horner and Lynn Bloom and Janet Emig, to name a few.

I also benefited from being as naive as Peter Rabbit when I came back to graduate school. Ignorant about the values of English departments, I didn't know that freshman English was to be despised, and I enjoyed teaching it from my first day as a teaching

assistant. Many times I felt that teaching writing saved my sanity as I negotiated the esoterica of graduate studies. Nor did I know that the freshman director's job was looked upon as banishment to Siberia, and after I finished my degree and had been hired as a temporary lecturer, I talked the department into letting me fill the vacancy that came up when the tenured professor who was serving as director lost his temper and quit in the middle of the semester. I was confident that I would enjoy the job and prosper in it, and I did.

Looking back, I realize that I learned early to reject negative messages. After appointing me freshman director, the chairman wrote me a letter saying that the executive committee wanted me to know officially that my chances of getting tenure were very poor. I must have received the letter because I found it several years later when I was cleaning out my desk, but I have no recollection of getting that letter. None. By the time it registered on my consciousness, I was tenured.

I've also never accepted the bias against textbooks. Early in my teaching, I found that most of the textbooks I looked at didn't fit what really went on in writing courses, so when I became freshman director I decided to write one that reflected what I'd learned. Several people were telling me that textbooks weren't taken seriously and wouldn't help me get ahead in the profession, but obviously I didn't believe them. My middle-aged common sense told me that writing a fresh textbook made sense; some project like writing a critical study of Ellen Glasgow's minor novels didn't, and I couldn't bring myself to spend my time that way. I still believe that textbooks are more important than critical theory; they're an important element in paradigm shifts and they can help one make a real impact on the profession.

I've also steadfastly rejected our English department's low opinion of writing courses even when that low opinion was reflected in my salary. At one point, one of the members of the Executive Committee undertook to explain to me why I wasn't better paid by telling me what I did didn't belong in English departments—it was high school stuff. Shades of the University of Michigan! I managed not to hit him, but I retorted angrily that I was tough and had staying power and I'd prove him wrong. It gave me considerable satisfaction when he and I were promoted to full professor the same year. I learned something valuable from that encounter: I don't need the approval of people I don't respect.

For most of my years at Texas I didn't feel that colleagues were deliberately hostile or that they meant to be unkind—rather they saw themselves as what Saul Bellow, in his novel *Herzog*, calls “reality teachers.” That's how I'd describe my chairman when I applied for a job at Texas after I finished my degree there, and he told me that I had three things against me: my age, my sex, and my degree from Texas. Reality teachers are into telling you unpleasant things for your own good—things like how fierce the competition is going to be in whatever it is you've chosen to do, or how little money you're going to make, or what a poor chance the book you're writing has of succeeding, or how hopeless a project is that you've taken on. They generally preface these friendly warnings with “I hate to tell you this, but....” I always suspect that they don't hate telling me at all; they enjoy it and are looking forward to being able to say later, “I told you so,” if, by some happy chance, I don't succeed. I suppose the reality teacher's claim is that he (and they usually seem to be men) is trying to soften your inevitable disappointment. I don't think

dire predictions work that way at all—they're only likely to create self-fulfilling prophecies.

My response to reality teachers is to invoke a useful maxim: Reject all unsolicited advice. If you need people's opinion, fine: ask for it and consider what they have to say. But if you have made a conscious choice and are doing something you believe in and think is important, then stick with it and put everything you have into making it work. Don't accept negative messages that say what you're doing is unfashionable or out of date or politically incorrect. Internalizing such messages will only sap your energy and deflect you from your purpose.

At this point, I can imagine some of you are wondering, "How did she ever get tenure?" The answer is that reality teachers are frequently wrong. When I came up for tenure, a different chairman and a sympathetic dean did value teaching writing and they did count fresh textbooks as scholarship. Which shows that trying to anticipate what the political climate is going to be down the road is risky. Better to set your course by what you believe in and stay on it. You'll also respect yourself more.

In my teaching, my scholarship, my books, and my professional politics, I have consistently charted my course by asking one primary question: What will make students stronger, more confident writers who can think for themselves? My answers to that question have changed and evolved over three decades of teaching, and I've been influenced by scores of fine teachers. Among them are Ed Corbett, Peter Elbow, Mina Shaughnessy, Mike Rose, and Janet Emig, to name just a handful. All of us, along with some colleagues in secondary school English, have, together, done something

remarkable—we've created a student-centered discipline of teaching writing. What a contrast to most other disciplines that are anything but student-centered.

It was that concern for students who wanted and needed writing courses that led Jim Kinneavy, John Ruskiewicz, and me several years ago to propose creating a separate and autonomous writing division. Our chair had just unilaterally abolished our required upper division writing course because it required too many faculty, and many in the department were saying we shouldn't even be teaching freshman writing—high school stuff, you know. But far from breathing a sigh of relief that a few of us were ready to take over the job, the literature faculty were furious at the prospect of giving up territory. Our proposal went down to resounding defeat, and we were consigned to purgatory in the department. I made matters worse by my CCCC Chair's Address in 1985 when I called for breaking composition's bond to the literature power structure. (Not incidentally, eight years later at the University of Texas the dean of liberal arts established a separate division of composition and rhetoric and made its faculty independent of the English department.)

But what could the department do to the three of us, all tenured? Any possible raises were minuscule anyway, we had already shown we didn't care about popularity, and we couldn't be punished by being assigned to teach freshman English. We liked to teach freshman English. John and I were kept off all important department committees. Punishment? We took the extra time to write *The Scott Foresman Handbook for Writers*. We survived and were allowed to do our work. No one who goes against the grain can ask for more.

Unquestionably, I have found the strength and confidence to go against the grain at my institution because I've found reinforcement within my own discipline. From my first CCCC meeting more than 20 years ago, generous people have accepted me and encouraged my work. Ed Corbett, Dick Larson, Jix Lloyd-Jones, and Don Stewart are just a few who have helped me along. CCCC has been the organization that has made it possible for me to do useful work and to learn from talented teachers and fresh thinkers. It's always felt like home.

So it hasn't been pleasant in the last two years to find that I'm now going against the grain in CCCC—or so it seems, from the direction in which the journals and the conventions have been going. For a number of reasons that I think have much to do with many writing faculty still being unable to break their bonds to the literary establishment, the academic left seems to have taken over writing classrooms, putting ideology at the forefront of their teaching and putting the teacher's social agenda before the students' rights to develop their own voices and abilities.

Probably many already know my arguments against these trends, and I won't go into them again here. But I continue to believe strongly that teaching writing in a politically-focused classroom does *not* help students to become stronger, more confident writers who think for themselves. Currently that opinion makes me a heretic, a dissenter from the new orthodoxy. Many of those who oppose me have been extraordinarily unpleasant in their responses to my position—read their letters in the May, 1993, *College Composition and Communication* if you think this is a gentleman's disagreement.

This conflict has been painful but necessary, I think. For me, the issues were too crucial to remain silent. I have to say I've been disappointed by many people's behavior. I

thought there would have been more respect for difference, more interest in reasonable discussion. I also thought there would have been more courage among those who dislike the current trends. But I'm not going to let the angry rhetoric of these past two years mar the last chapter of what has been a wonderful career. I feel extraordinarily lucky to have been able to spend the last 30 years earning a living doing something I love, something I believe has made a difference and helped many people.

I've been a little surprised that I've had no trouble closing the door and walking away from a career that I've enjoyed so much. It also feels strange not to have a book deadline facing me for the first time since I can remember. But I'm now fully engaged in my community and rather than theorizing about racism and sexism, I'm trying to combat them more directly. I'm an active volunteer with Planned Parenthood and have taken over their fund raising in Austin; I'm involved in a program for improving child care; and I'm writing for the Austin Project, an ambitious program by which we hope to start reversing the cycle of poverty and despair so many Austin families are caught in. And I'm much engaged in the local battle against the fanatics of the religious right who want to censor curriculum in the schools and take away women's right to control their bodies and their lives. And believe me, compared to the religious right, the academic left are pikers. The money, the zealotry, and the anti-intellectualism of the right make them a far more formidable threat than the classroom marxists. The latter will probably become unfashionable and their influence will fade; the former are engaged in a holy war and are not going to go away.

So I'm still engaged and still a rhetorician. As for CCCC, it was a wonderful party, but now I am out of here!