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Connecting

Helen Walker
Section Editor

Steven DeGeorge

Johanna Rodgers

Jeremiah Conway

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Connecting: Pain

Section Editor's Message

This issue's "Connecting" narratives, it pains me to say, are less inspiring than usual. Instead the stories chronicle more pain than anything else. Truth be told, we are never really sensitive enough consistently enough. We do things, teach things, that cause students pain, great pain, make them disconsolate, cause them to sob both in the privacy of their rooms and, worse surely, in the public spaces of our classrooms. Then, too, if we do get off the hook and something works out not so badly, we are not even sure what caused our reprieve so that we can repeat it.

Should we be chastised for these transgressions if not burned at the stake? I can't say no to this; maybe we should be. But what I think I can say in our defense is that teaching is so incredibly hard and so stultifyingly complex that, no matter our best intentions, we will make mistakes. I can say too that the best learning process is hard for our students apart from our choices and that, as Jerry Conway's piece "Emily's Cave" attests to, it is often fraught with pain.

The truth is out. Try as hard as we may, teachers don't know everything. Some days we don't even know anything about what our students need from us. But Stephen DeGeorge insists that "you have to try." Jerry Conway suggests that this pain is "an old story re-enacted," and Johannah Rodgers shows us that, even if we can't answer the hard questions, there is something we can learn.

Let us hope, shall we, that truth is the best teacher, that each of us reading this issue of "Connecting" is a fantastic learner, and that trying counts for a lot.

The Things They Bring to School

Stephen L. DeGeorge

I called my mother Mommy. It was one of the things I was trying to work through the year she died. I was in seventh grade, but everything was put on hold while she struggled with cancer. Then she was gone. I can still picture the scene at my aunt and uncle's house when my father arrived from the hospital and said just that. "She's gone, kids. She's gone." I was thirteen, my brother was fifteen, and my sister was eleven.

So my mother became frozen in time at age 39, and everything became surreal. One of the little nagging reminders of that strangeness was that, through our teens and on into our adult lives, we would awkwardly refer to her as Mommy. It was a small symbol of all the other things that would never be worked through with her.

That night my father, my uncle, and the priest from my mother's church got good and drunk around our kitchen table. Sadly, this was a harbinger of things to

Stephen DeGeorge is chair of the Education Department and chair of the Social Science Division of Bryan College in Dayton, TN. He has spent 18 years in school administration. His doctorate is in educational leadership from West Virginia University.

come for about the next decade.

My mother died on June 26. The summer went by as summers do, and after Labor Day we returned to school—classes and sports and choir, jobs, dances, and such. I was there, trying to compete for my place, but home was slowly turning into a full-blown nightmare of neglect and pain. I slipped in school. I quit sports. By my junior year I was getting there only about four out of every five days.

In my years of teaching and administration, I have seen incredible pain in some of my students. Recently, I began reflecting on their stories and was shocked at what I knew of their lives. They had passed under my general influence, and I don't know if I helped them at all. I grieve for them though. I know something of the pain that they brought to school, and I grieve for them. . . .

I remember Dena—in fifth grade in a small private school when I met her, a pretty girl who looked a couple of years older than most of the other girls in her class. She also happened to be tougher than most of the boys. She intimidated everybody. She was often angry and had no compunction about slugging or kicking her peers. The lower school principal knew something about her background and took a counseling approach with her. But things were not improving, so he sent her to me. I assigned her some discipline, gave her the standard speech on self control, and sent her back to class.

At my first opportunity I met with her principal and asked about her. “Well,” he said, “she and her older sister came from a real bad situation. Apparently they were abused. The family they’re in now adopted them a few years ago, but there’s been a divorce, so they are with that dad and a new mom.” That got my attention. “Now a new baby is on the way, and this seems to really bother Dena. Every time somebody mentions it, she goes ballistic. I think she’s had a lot of counseling and really knows the drill. She seems able to talk about her issues, but she just can’t seem to deal with them.”

As I mull over the convoluted story, I mourn for Dena’s losses. Her life had been disrupted time and time again with reminders that she was not the central figure in anyone’s life. Her most common reaction was anger, and she certainly knew how to spread her misery around. . . .

Jared came to my office to be scolded for one in a series of misdemeanors. I knew something of his situation. Or thought I did. He had a loving mother and a new stepfather. His step-dad was a good man who had never had children. Now he had three and one on the way. He was trying to bring order to this family and establish himself as a loving but firm father figure. Jared was thirteen or so, and the results were predictable.

I tried to show some understanding, although divorce was not something I had directly experienced. It seemed, though, that half the kids I knew were from broken homes, so I thought I knew their concerns. I asked Jared, “Do you see much of your biological father?”

“My father? My parents aren’t divorced, Dr. DeGeorge. My father died. I thought you knew that.” Jared’s face had reddened to match mine; how did I not know this? He continued, “I don’t know how he died. No one will tell me how my father died. He was in his car. They found him in his car by the side of the road. He was dead when they found him. That’s all I know. He didn’t crash the car. He just died there.”

I was stunned. I don’t remember anything else either of us said. I went immediately from that meeting to the office of our elementary principal. She had

been at the school for several years and would probably know something. “It was a suicide,” she said. “It was pretty obvious he took his own life. I thought you knew this. I think it’s fairly common knowledge.”

“But the children?” I asked. “They don’t know? Even the two older ones?”

“I guess not. I guess their mother couldn’t bear to tell them.”

By the time I left her office, two things were abundantly clear to me: the first was that Jared was living in a state of grief fueled by confusion; the second, the really awful thing, was that I also knew the “common knowledge” that he did not. This was the crux of the boy’s pain. How could it be common knowledge at the school and still be unknown to the one who was being crushed by it?

How does a child or adolescent begin to explain to teachers that he is overwhelmed by grief? Can he even imagine that his teachers could or would understand the things that eat away at his motivation to work math problems or create a good science project? I lived in a rural community, attended a regional high school. Did they know? They didn’t seem to, but I believe they knew. I suspect that on some level they cared, but I believe they were without a strategy to help me. The one simple message that I received regularly in school was “You are not living up to your potential” or, the more harmful version, “You have ability; why are you wasting it?”

When a child carries deep trauma and grief to school, she is certainly not living up to her potential. She is “wasting” to be sure, just not as intentionally as we may think.

These stories may remind you of students you have known. They come and go through your classrooms and your lives. Grieve for them, yes. But I am suggesting that you do something more. Look into your own story in order to find understanding of your students’ pain. Then develop a strategy and reach out to them on a deeper level. Show them that you care enough to act on their behalf. They need someone to understand that grief colors everything they do. They don’t need someone to excuse them from the responsibilities of living and learning. They need someone to understand them, to be truthful with them, and to reach for them as they are pulled by the terrible tides of their hurt. You may not save them. You have to try. ☐

Translating Authority

Johannah Rodgers

Edi was not particularly tall or large, but there was something about her physically that was a bit foreboding. Everything about her—her clothes, her expression, her body—seemed incredibly well defended and nonnegotiable. Here was someone who had to be dealt with, I thought to myself when she entered the classroom. The way she seated herself in the back, not hiding but very separate from the

Johannah Rodgers is visiting assistant professor of English, Rhetoric and Composition and Creative Writing at Manhattan College. She taught from 1999-2003 as an adjunct lecturer at The City College Center for Worker Education. She has studied at Stanford, Oxford, and Yale universities. She holds an MFA in Fiction Writing from The City College of New York and a Ph.D. in English/Rhetoric and Composition from the CUNY Graduate Center.

others, made me feel she wanted to be left alone—that no one could touch her. Not even, or especially not, me, the teacher. As the semester progressed, if not actively criticizing the students she was grouped with, she ignored them, so much so that a few students actually asked me to put them in other groups for future work.

A few weeks into the semester, we did a translation exercise which involved splitting up into small groups and translating a Pablo Neruda poem. About one third of my students are native Spanish speakers, which means that, when the class is divided into groups of four or five, each will have at least one Spanish speaker. I then ask each group to translate a poem collaboratively. Students in each group who do not speak Spanish must rely on the Spanish speaker or speakers to explain the literal meaning of each word. Then, as a group, they all decide on what specific English word to use in the translation. I do not speak or read Spanish so am unable to offer any guidance for translating specific words. In that particular poem, there were two or three unusual, possibly literary or old-fashioned words which most of the Spanish speaking students had never seen before. Edi knew all of them. As a result, she became a whole-class resource. She never smiled or laughed but, instead, perhaps overtaxed as the center of attention, handed out the explanations of these unique words as though it were a burden she had to put up with.

After that class, however, I noticed that she was a bit more responsive to other students' comments and much more integrated into the class as a whole. She also became more actively engaged by class discussions and small group work.

I am not sure what caused this change. Some of it was probably occurring slowly over the course of the semester, but I also strongly sensed that some of the changes could be attributed to her experience of the translation exercise. But what about that experience resulted in this change? Was it that she was able to act more like a teacher and that made her willing or better able to listen to other students? Did working in Spanish give her a sense of confidence and authority she didn't have before? Was it the act of translation itself which resulted in an awareness of more than one way to look at things and that her classmates could offer interesting suggestions? It was, in all likelihood, a combination of these and many other factors that I was not even aware of that caused this change. However, in terms of my own teaching, I can more exactly pinpoint the effects of this: I learned once again how important it is to establish spaces where students can exercise their authority in innovative ways in the writing classroom. ☺

Emily's Cave

Jeremiah Conway

Like everything else, teaching can become routine, not necessarily dull or unpleasant, but remarkably unremarkable. Perhaps this is why certain moments are prized when the fog of the usual lifts and there is a reawakening to the fierce

Jeremiah Conway is associate professor of philosophy at the University of Southern Maine, teaching in both the Philosophy Department and the University Honors Program. His research interests are in the area of hermeneutics and the interconnection between philosophy and literature. In 2005 he was the recipient of the University's Award for Teaching Excellence.

potential of classrooms. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky writes about how the presence of good memories, even one, preserved from childhood, can protect and sustain a life. The same, I suspect, is true of teaching. But instances of good teaching don't come labeled for easy identification. On the contrary, these moments often arrive unexpectedly, appearing as messy disasters.

The following is one teaching memory.

I was shaking a leg across campus to avoid being late for class. We were reading Plato's *Republic*, and the focus that afternoon was on the famous myth of the cave at the beginning of Book Seven. In the myth, Socrates presents an extended image of "how education—or the lack of it—affects our nature" (168). He asks a bright, young man, Glaucon, to picture an underground cave where people sit, shackled at their necks and legs, such that they are confined to the same spot and can see only what is directly in front of them. It is a haunting tale, suggesting that in our ordinary lives, we start from the position of slaves whose vision is consumed with shadows cast upon the wall of the culture we inhabit—shadows that are mistaken for reality and whose display is manipulated by figures behind our backs.

The students were just beginning to work through familiar connections: how the prisoners in the myth resemble characters in the *Republic*, who are locked into stock Athenian notions of justice; how the release of their "shackles" coincides with the stunned realization of their ignorance, jimmied by Socrates' questions. The class was preceding uneventfully—the usual back and forth questioning: why have the prisoners shackled by chains, rather than ropes? What is the odd wall at the prisoners' backs? Who are the concealed "puppeteers" walking upon it? The latter question drew a heated response from Emily. Emily didn't understand why it was important to pin down who was walking across that wall. "Socrates left the figures nameless—so, why not take our clue from him and leave it at that?" I offered my perspective, but Emily wasn't buying any of it; she seemed exasperated and quoted a footnote by the text's translator G. M. A. Grube:

A Platonic myth or parable, like a Homeric simile, is often elaborated in considerable detail. These contribute to the vividness of the picture but often have no other function, and it is a mistake to look for any symbolic meaning in them. (168)

Sensing an impasse, I turned to other students who had their hands raised.

I noticed that Emily's eyebrows were knitting, and a closed look of disagreement, even anger, was taking over her face—one I hadn't seen before. I turned toward the unmistakable pain in the young woman. "Emily, is there anything wrong?" She remained silent, but her face knotted further. She began to cry. The crying intensified. It became a low, wrenching sob. I was at a complete loss. Eventually, I felt I had to say something. "I hope I (or we) haven't done anything to offend you, Emily. No one intended to hurt." It was a weak statement, but it was all I could think of.

She was still crying; words came out, but they were broken: "Sometimes I come out of this class, and I'm so frustrated. I try, and try, and still don't get anywhere." She grew quieter, ending in a whisper: "Maybe it's appropriate, given what we're reading."

The comments sat there in the midst of the class. After initial fears that her crying was an outburst of bitter disappointment with me as teacher, I found my-

self clinging to her final comment. I turned to the young woman, “I think what you’ve said is important. A story like this forces us to wrack our brains about what it means, and it’s not immediately clear what is significant and what is not. But the fact that we aren’t sure, that we feel so ignorant grappling with it, is a difficulty that, I suspect, is intentionally handed over to us by Plato. It is built into the very way he writes.”

Like Emily’s tears, something was breaking out of me. I was defending a way of teaching: “Yes, it’s frustrating not to be told what the images of Socrates mean and to be asked to decipher them in the context of our lives. But you know, Emily, I am no longer able to teach this work by trying to pour information into your heads about Plato’s philosophy. It won’t help. This is a work of great imagination that addresses itself to our imagination; it arises not simply out of intellect, but out of the fabric of feeling and body. If we are to understand such a work, we must enter it, and read it not just as a tale from way back when, but as a story about us—as Socrates says himself.” At this point, I sensed I was professing a bit too earnestly, so I shut up. I wasn’t sure whether I was in the midst of a catastrophe.

The next day I met with Emily and cut straight to the point: “Could you help me understand what happened yesterday?”

She took a deep breath and began: “You know, Professor, I came here from Wellesley College. I met a lot of very intelligent, ambitious students there, who were focused on results. We complained about the workload, but the game was to get through the stuff and move on. We did it extremely well. But after awhile, a hard shell of efficiency was built up that nothing much could pierce.

“The events of 9/11 shook me. I wasn’t myself for some time. I grew disturbed by the distance between what we were studying and ourselves. We weren’t really being touched by much, if anything, in classes. The material didn’t really matter to us as people. Anyway, I left. I stayed away from school for a year and came to this university. No offense, but I didn’t expect much. This is a state school. My only reason for coming was that I no longer wanted my parents to pay big bucks for what really didn’t seem to matter.”

Emily continued: “You know, most of the things we’ve read this semester—Homer and Sappho, Thucydides and Aristophanes, Plato and the tragedies—I had read already. Very little was new. I had read the entire *Republic* in two of my courses in freshman year. I entered your course, convinced that I was very knowledgeable about these texts, and, in a way, I am. I’ve read commentators and listened to professors talk about them. But this course is frustrating because you ask us to puzzle out the meaning of many small details that none of my previous instructors had ever spoken about—like the questions about who are the guys walking on the wall behind the prisoners in the cave. You asked, and I wanted to shout out: I DON’T KNOW, AND I DON’T CARE BECAUSE IT’S NOT IMPORTANT.” Her words came out in a loud surprisingly blunt voice, and she stopped, as if catching herself.

“I came here thinking I was going to shine. I was going to show what I knew. And what happens? You ask questions about the material that doesn’t draw upon the information I had studied. Sometimes I feel thoughtless, stupid. I find myself questioning what I have learned. But it’s more than this. While I was dismissing your questions, I suddenly caught myself. I saw what I was doing, and I was ashamed.”

I asked Emily what she meant by “catching herself” and why the shame. The young woman paused and looked directly at me: “I caught my assumptions. I realized what I was doing: by dismissing your questions, I wanted to hold the material at arm’s length, to say that seeing ourselves in the story is not the point. I wanted questions that would show off answers I already knew. I wanted to appear bright. The tears came as I saw what I was doing. And I’ll tell you something else: for a long time in this course, my classmates didn’t impress me. They weren’t as quick or articulate as my peers at Wellesley. And what has happened? Over the course of the semester I started to pay attention to the connections they were drawing between themselves and the readings. I began to recognize that they have been doing what I was unable to do at that school, which was why I left. I felt ashamed of myself.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I was going to say that she was being too hard on herself. I saved myself from this paternalistic flattery by the realization that this was one of those precious moments when I didn’t have to say anything. I was being taught by my student. It was a lesson witnessed before, but one I find riveting each time it is delivered: students are often eloquent instructors about how certain philosophical works transform lives. They remind us of what drove us into learning and loving these texts in the first place.

When I finally did have something to say, I was seeking to thank her. “Emily, I think you said something very truthful yesterday in class when you said that your crying was somehow appropriate, given the text. It’s a very disturbing thing to recognize, as Socrates claims we must, that we all start our education as prisoners at the bottom of the cave. He makes clear that it’s terribly painful to reorient ourselves, to turn our eyes from the shadows toward the light. You found yourself a prisoner in that cave. You recognized the pull of forces that were blocking you from even caring to interpret the work in other ways. You were in the midst of that painful turning yesterday. My only disagreement is with the shame you felt in crying. Your shame came from the awareness that your motivations were shallow and unworthy of you. But to recognize this with tears is part of the pain Socrates describes in turning from the shadows to the light. It is the price of admission to what he describes as education: the re-orienting of the soul.”

Emily smiled faintly. I sensed we both knew that a very old story had been re-enacted. ☺

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