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High Stakes Gambling in the Master Class

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High Stakes Gambling in the Master Class

Cover Page Footnote

Lynn Z. Bloom, Board of Trustees Distinguished Professor and Aetna Chair of Writing at the University of Connecticut, has published over one hundred personal/academic essays, including "(Im)Patient" (2005) and "Voices" (2004), some collected in *Composition Studies as a Creative Art* (1999). Her other books include a biography *Doctor Spock* (1972), editions of two American women prisoners' diaries (1980, 1989), composition studies works, and numerous essay textbooks. Carla Hill graduated from the University of Connecticut summa cum laude in art history in May 2005. As a result of research for her novella, she plans to study art restoration in Florence, Italy beginning in January 2007. They've enjoyed collaborating—as teacher and student and as authors.

High Stakes Gambling in the Master Class

Lynn Z. Bloom and Carla Hill

*You gotta know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em,
Know when to walk away and know when to run.
You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table.
There'll be time enough for countin' when the dealin's done.
—Kenny Rogers, "The Gambler"*

Focus: This essay explores some of the unarticulated intangibles in a relationship calculated to produce a distinguished thesis—sometimes out of thin air—that between Master Teacher and Honors Student. What a gamble! During the first semester of low key, high pressure Master Class tutorial sessions very little appears to be going on; during the second semester the work looks dull, derivative, disastrous, and the students—with grades hanging in the balance—get depressed. Yet the results, during the final semester, are often spectacular. What's going on? Why does this process so often work? What enables students to stop taking baby steps and to tap dance up the walls and across the ceiling? This process is a challenge to describe because most of what's happening is hard to articulate. It's felt, not spoken, an improvisatory dance with subtly changing melodies, overtones, undertones; unexpected rhythms and surprising dynamics. So after proffering my own analysis, I let the experience of my most recent advisee Carla Hill serve as a case study of a new-writer (and exemplary student)-at-work, and a commentary on the efficacy of two gamblers at work, playing their hunches. I conclude by examining two recent studies that show experts at work by the seat of their pants, playing their hunches.

Old Honors Students Never Die

I am not a gambling woman, by temperament or inclination. I love and indeed count on the comforts of a tenured professorship, steady publication, happy and nurturing family and friends. My house is alarmed (boo!) against fire, flood, freezing, carbon monoxide, and intruders. I drive a Volvo. I don't buy lottery tickets, fall (so far) for internet scams. Though I've flown over Everest via Buddha Air, snorkeled with seals in the Galapagos, and spent an energetic research month in high-tension England in the aftermath of the Lockerbie bombing, I have never been to Vegas or set foot in the Indian casinos right here in River City.

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Nevertheless, “Question Authority” reads my ideal bumper sticker—the motto of my Inner Gambler. One reason I’m so cheerful as a faculty member now is that long ago I developed the life-saving ability to ignore advice I didn’t want to hear. As the University of Michigan’s Outstanding Honors English Major, I dismissed the recommendation my advisor routinely gave to all graduating women, “Get a teaching certificate so you’ll have something to fall back on.” Every undergraduate paper I wrote deliberately challenged the professor’s views or the field’s conventional wisdom. I got my comeuppance only once, arguing that Milton’s Eve did too have some redeemable virtues. “You can’t say that!” said my pre-feminist professor, tattooing the paper with a C, though he gave me a wary A for the course.

I disregarded as well the graduate director’s fusillade, “What right have you to take a man’s seat? You’ll probably marry and have children, and that will destroy your chances in the profession. Every child a man has is an incentive for him to strive harder. Every child a woman has is an albatross around her neck, an encouragement to drop out.” Reader, I married just before grad school began (sssh!), took the seat anyway (humble furniture which eventually morphed into an endowed chair), and wrote my dissertation on literary biography, a subject so far out in left field that most faculty couldn’t see that mote in the distance. Within five years I finished the PhD with a baby on my knee, two book manuscripts at the publishers, and another baby forthcoming.

Those two children followed their humanist parents’ footsteps with straight 4.0 averages for four years, undergraduate honors projects in mathematics and cell biology, a Churchill fellowship, and later, two MIT PhDs. Though we are in very different fields, I have learned, up close and personal over the years as a parent and as a lifetime teacher of honors students, to appreciate the values of my children, their qualities of mind, and the—often unconventional—ways they learn.

They Just Live to Teach

In every honors student I recognize the honors student I once was, still am, and might be—eager for the life of the mind that also engages heart and soul. However, only during the writing of this essay have I consciously analyzed my implicit understanding of where these students live and what they live for. Because of my affinity for honors students, I trust them as I trust myself. I also realize that I could be way off base, or simply misled by my own romantic good will. Yet if there are numbers of students bright but disengaged, resentful, indifferent to academic life, I haven’t met them—they’re not the honors students I know and love.

Here’s what I’ve been able to count on in over forty years of living with and teaching honors students. What follows is an obligato to the observations of Lewis Terman, Howard Gardner, Joseph Renzuli, Sally Reis, Denise Noldon and William Sedlacek, and other analysts of the gifted and talented.

- 1) Honors students are smart.
- 2) They love to learn; when they’re interested in a subject, they’ll spend incalculable amounts of time and energy to understand and explore not only its essential domain but unanticipated byways.

- 3) They are creative from the get-go; they inhabit a universe that they configure, reconfigure, and invent.
- 4) Consequently, they learn as they think, in unconventional and unorthodox ways. They love to challenge authority, defy conventional wisdom.
- 5) They are independent and want to be left to their own devices to figure things out, to solve problems.
- 6) They think they can do anything they put their minds to. They are not humble.
- 7) They are not always right.
- 8) Fortunately, most have the grace to admit this, and, as the wicked wits of the west, most have a sense of humor. These qualities help them learn from their mistakes.
- 9) They set high standards for themselves, often much higher than their mentors or their schools expect. They are not content with less than excellence.
- 10) They expect—and are accustomed to—rewards for their efforts and achievements.

Honors students and their teachers, I believe, are saved from a sense of earned entitlement and priggish rectitude by two paramount qualities. They are enormous risk-takers, gamblers ready to go for broke with every new idea, every major project. Consequently, they are also willing to make colossal course corrections—to revise, adapt, change direction entirely if necessary. I love this sense of adventure as my own, for beneath my bourgeois exterior beats a gambler's heart which leaps up with pleasure when students approach me with unusual, unlikely, even weird undertakings. Just for the fun of it I'll accept, well, almost any honors student with an independent study project, just to see what will happen and what I can learn as well as teach. For I expect us both to learn a lot as the student pursues what begins as a gleam in the eye and occasionally threatens to overwhelm both of us. My optimistic trust may be the biggest gamble of all.

Master Class: The Dynamics

Thus my resulting Master Classes are highly unconventional. Unlike the advanced music class taught by an eminent performer who shows a select group of prodigies how to do it his way or an advanced creative writing workshop where a literary hotshot clones copycats of style or point of view, my students do not emulate my work. Indeed, they may be unfamiliar with it, arriving in my office primarily because the word is out that I'm available and that I'll trust them. The only work of mine I require them to read is *Fact and Artifact: Writing Nonfiction*, for any independent study in English will inevitably involve a lot of writing. No matter what the student decides to do, we become not Master and sophisticated pupil, but two gamblers in league with one another and pitted against the house. Of course, the student has the most to lose; a senior thesis could crash and burn during the last semester, too late for resuscitation. Though I try not to let that happen, I am reminded of Macbeth's cautious query to his Lady as they are plot-

ting Duncan's murder: "If we should fail—" and her reply—fatalistic, realistic, or incredulous, as you will—"We fail!" Followed by her exhortation, "But screw your courage to the sticking place,/And we'll not fail" (I, vii, 57-59).

The Big Gamble, A Novel Honors Project

University Scholars are, in my experience, a lot of fun. These highest-achieving undergrads essentially have free run of the curriculum, graduate as well as undergraduate, during their last three semesters, and are expected to invent and complete a significant scholarly project by the time they graduate. Indeed, working with these Scholars, though anomalous to most undergraduate teaching, resembles the process of advising graduate students on theses or dissertations—free-ranging, interactive, generative of new ideas—and fast paced because of the degree's time constraints.

Students majoring in a variety of fields sometimes arrive at my office eager to write historical novels—an ideal way to combine scholarly research and creativity, but a huge gamble if the prospective author is a novice at creative writing. Any prudent English professor would advise them to take some courses in fiction writing before embarking on such an enormous task, but they have no time during their last two years to bother with the prerequisites, so I just say "Sure. What do you want to do?" And they're off and running. Even if they don't come up with the Great American Novel (and who could, in such a short time?), I am confident that they'll learn a lot and produce a manuscript that is competent, at worst; inspired and engaging, at best.

How much advice and assistance I offer depends on the individual student's needs, desires, and temperament. My research on the writing processes of anxious writers has led me to believe that less is usually more; I don't want the students to get overwhelmed with too much advice too soon or bogged down in revising and editing—concerns that should come with later drafts, not first. So first I ask them to tell me what they intend to do and have them sketch out an overall plan for their opus, if they can. If they can't, they'll need to freewrite large and long until they find a focus. We arrange for weekly meetings and a weekly amount of writing, say ten to fifteen pages. I read it, we discuss some general issues: why this character? That theme? Where is this line of action going? What was happening in history in the time and place you're talking about? I never line-edit and rarely ask them to rewrite anything during this warm-up period of generating text, which may last an entire semester. My major advice is threefold: keep writing; keep reading—one or two novels that do what you're trying to accomplish, as well as background material in your subject; and, most importantly, Be of Good Cheer.

Enter Carla Hill, art and art history major, University Scholar, exemplary model and gambler extraordinaire.

Carla Hill and *Ritratto di una donna*

Late in the fall semester of her junior year Carla approached me about being her advisor on a proposed novella to be set in Florence, where she was spending the spring semester. She planned to learn the language, bask in the art, soak up the history, and explore the territory, returning at the beginning of her senior year to write. "Sure," I said. "Why not?"

Carla's writing during the first semester reflected both her art history background and her total lack of experience as a creative writer. Carla wrote excellent description—long, lush passages brimming with sensory details—architecture, scenes, people, clothing, paintings, fabrics, floor coverings, textured walls—treats to the eye. She put her readers in Florence, walked us around and through the city, chronicling its ancient art history and recent military history when occupied by the Germans in World War II. But her characters were wooden. Though their costumes were gorgeous, their motivation was ill-defined, their dialogue stilted, their actions went nowhere. The Carla-analogue character seemed out of place; we learned a lot about the arrival in contemporary Florence of a young art student, short on sleep and on Italian vocabulary, but why was she in the story?

However, by the semester's end shards of a plot had begun to emerge: an Italian Renaissance painting (I suggested Artemisia Gentileschi) overpainted during World War II to preserve it from Nazi looting. A young American innocent abroad, Persephone, in whose hospitable relatives' house the painting resides, having been deposited there by Persephone's grandmother during her escape from Nazi-occupied Florence. A shady art conservator. His disaffected colleague, a woman art professor who befriends her student, Persephone. Fast cars (Italian, of course), dark streets, strange neighborhoods. So, on the strength of the number of accumulated pages, the research required to document the art and art political history, and my own combination of faith, hope, and generosity (along with the sense that Carla would not be happy with a B, which her work actually merited at that stage), I gave her an A-.

By return e-mail she requested an A in order to maintain her straight 4.0 average, which both of us understood would have gamed the system; I may be a gambler but I'm not a liar. We settled on an Incomplete, to be reviewed after the novella was completed; the spring semester would be taken pass/fail, to remove the pressure of a grade. I told her not to write anything for a month, but to read novels about artists such as *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *Lady with a Lapdog*. Although I was on leave in the spring, I was happy to continue the independent study. However, early in the new year I—ordinarily very healthy—caved to an assault of bad germs, did time in the hospital, and when I tottered to consciousness in early February Carla came over for lunch, bearing seventy-five new pages. Although pentimento fragments appeared intermittently in the new version, the new emphasis was on the complicated double plot (preserving the Gentileschi painting during World War II and recovering—and rescuing it—in contemporary Florence) and equally complex characters. The action was clearly motivated, fast-paced, engaging, with dialogue to match. "Just keep going," I said, and a month later another hundred pages appeared that required minimal tweaking, buttressed by a ten-page bibliography. Though the gamble had paid off, handsomely, for both of us, I couldn't claim any credit for the completed novella.

Nor could I explain why this combination of my benign neglect and Carla's independence had worked so well; a writer's desire for perfection is no guarantee that she'll come even close to attaining it. So I decided to ask her to explain how and why she worked as she did. A few months after she graduated, 4.0 intact, from the University of Connecticut in May 2005 I emailed the following questions to her, and she replied by email. The transcript, unedited except to remove a couple of repetitions, appears herewith.

The Dialogue: Gamblers at Work—and Play

Why did you decide to write a novel(la) for your honors thesis?

Writing a novella appealed to me because it was inherently more creative than some of the other pieces of work I had done. Through some more traditional academic research in my major, I had begun to rediscover my capability for creativity, and writing a novella seemed like the next logical step. It is part of my personality to be attracted to change and challenge, especially those challenges I create for myself. I suppose I crafted this project partially as a test. People had often told me that I was a good writer, but writing an academic paper is not quite as glamorous as writing a story that non-academic people can read for enjoyment. I thought that if I could write a novella then I would deserve the distinction of a good writer.

How did you expect to learn to write one?

Honestly, it never occurred to me that I would have to learn to write a novella. I had done a great deal of reading, especially of historical fiction, and, with the exception of calculus in my senior year of high school, I had yet to find something I could not do. I saw my hypothetical novella as a creative presentation of traditional academic research instead of a work of creative writing. From that perspective, I felt that my experience with academic writing and research was adequate preparation. It would need only a little modification. I was not writing fiction of my own fabrication but borrowing actual historical moments and events to create something new. The fact that my final product would be fictitious gave me some freedom. It also allowed me to invent plausible scenarios for gaps in the historical record or historical understanding. I could posit solutions under the protection of creative writing without the limitations of evidence and primary sources.

Why did you make no advance preparation (via writing courses, for example) for undertaking such an ambitious project?

That is exactly the question put to me by the creative writing director at UConn—who refused to work with me—and my answer is that I did not feel unprepared. In my own mind I was not embarking on a creative writing project, but a research project whose final form would be creative writing. I understood that what I was proposing would be difficult, but I did not see it as impossible.

What did you want to learn from writing your thesis? Did you have any intermediate goals? Long term goals?

I began my thesis with no expectations. It was an obstacle that I had erected and then had to overcome. I suppose that I wanted to learn something about myself from writing. By the beginning of my senior year, it had also been a while since I felt truly proud of something I had completed. I wanted a project that was enough of a challenge so that when I finished it would feel like something significant. Although I felt the skills were somewhere inside me, the actual writing of fiction was something I had never done, especially on such a large scale. I wanted to see if I could do it.

What did you expect or want from a thesis advisor? Did this change during the course of your project? If so, try to identify the pivotal points and analyze these.

My only qualification for an advisor was a reasonably accessible person who would sign the approval forms I needed without asking too many questions. What I found in Dr. Bloom was something much more. She regarded me as a whole person, asking about my future plans within the first five minutes of our first meeting. I never felt as though there was a hierarchical division between teacher and pupil. Dr. Bloom deferred to my knowledge of the historical facts in my piece, and I took her advice in regard to my writing. She let my project develop at its own pace. Her role was truly advisory; I never felt as though I had to apply a suggestion or face dire consequences.

Why did you choose LZB?

I would like to say that it was her excellent credentials that led me to choose Dr. Bloom as my advisor, but the truth of the matter is that no choice was involved. There simply was no one else who would agree to do it.

What did you know about Dr. Bloom in advance, and from what sources did you get your info?

All I knew about Dr. Bloom before I met her was that she had agreed to help me. I did search the English department website under faculty before I met her. My real purpose was to find a photograph so that I would be able to properly identify this woman in case I had to search for her in the English building. I skimmed some of her curriculum vitae and scrolled through the long list of her publications. None of it mattered to me because I was so grateful for the support. Dr. Bloom's extensive experience, if it even registered, was an added bonus.

Why did you think we could work well together? Was this reaffirmed during the course of the year? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

I knew that I would work well with Dr. Bloom from the first meeting. She offered me tea and gave me her full attention instead of treating me as an unwelcome interruption. My first impression was reaffirmed at each of our weekly meetings during the first semester. She read the writing I gave her without leaving it bleeding red pen. I always left her office feeling excited about writing again and energized to produce a new batch of writing for the next week. The advice she gave was always relevant and manageable.

Where did you expect to be as a writer at the end of the first semester's work? By the time you'd completed your thesis?

I never considered myself, nor do I now consider myself, a writer. The same way that two photography classes do not make a photographer, two semesters of writing do not make me a writer. I am at best an amateur and at worst a complete fraud. My only goal for the first semester was to be halfway done with a readable piece of work, and my final goal was to drop a completed something at the Honors office so that I could graduate. Somewhere in the back of my mind I nurtured the long term goal of publication, and I suppose I still do, but I never expected seven months of writing to result in something up to that standard.

Why did you scrap the entire first semester's work and start over? What did you learn from your writing during the first semester? During the second semester?

Simply put, I scrapped the entire first semester's work because it was unreadable, and I was embarrassed that I had written it. I think my biggest problem the first semester was the romantic notion that the story would reveal itself to me

if I just started stringing words together—a Michelangelo-esque belief that the story was hidden somewhere inside my computer, and if I hit the keys in just the right way I could free it. The fact of the matter was that by the end of a semester of writing I had only created a series of disjointed vignettes that could never be a complete novella. My idea for a plot was simply too vague. I would begin to write with every intention of furthering the plot line only to encounter a difficulty. Instead of thinking through it and continuing to write, I would simply start writing somewhere else in the novella. Even this approach could have been successful if there existed some skeletal plot of the entire novella somewhere, but there was no such foundation. Another serious problem with the first semester's work was my main character. Dr. Bloom assured me that with all first novels the main character is somewhat autobiographical, but my autobiographical main character was stunted. I am a private person and in creating a character based on myself I was reluctant to reveal some of her characteristics in order to protect my own personality. The result was a constantly embarrassingly two-dimensional character.

I still blush when I think about some of the things I wrote first semester, and, although it is all saved in a folder on my computer, I will probably never read it. The writing I did at that time, however, was an essential part of the development of my thesis. I found about a hundred ways that did not work and a way of working in general that would not be successful. I learned that a well-developed plot line with all the kinks already resolved was an essential first step for me. I had to write through the difficulty in order to continue because an unresolved issue early was a symptom of a more fundamental problem that would continue to affect my plot.

The second semester I learned the value of writing nearly every day and working from beginning to end. I also learned that by observing people I knew well I could fashion my own characters. My main character became less autobiographical and more an amalgamation of people I knew well, including myself. It gave her much more flexibility. I also learned that deadlines, something I did not consider that much in the first semester, are a fantastic motivator. I set word goals for each week and month and kept a running tally of the number of words I had written.

Why did you ask for an A grade first semester, in light of the unspoken understanding that the A- you received was in itself a gift?

This is an embarrassing question, but the grade itself and the end of the first semester together constitute an important turning point in my project. I asked for what I could do to earn an "A" because I entered college with the ridiculous and somewhat meaningless goal of finishing with a perfect grade point average. I figured that some class during freshman year would make that impossible and I could forget about it, but by my junior year I was still on target. I knew that the work I had completed for my thesis by the end of the first semester was not "A" quality, but the effort it represented certainly was. The "A-" I received felt like punishment for doing something different [i.e. creative writing instead of an analytic paper]. I questioned the grade because if I did not say anything I knew it would poison my outlook on completing my thesis. It was as if I had failed already, and I was less than halfway done. It was Dr. Bloom's idea to give me an incomplete for the first semester and then reevaluate the completed project at the

end of the year. I thank her for this solution and also for demonstrating no ill-will after I questioned a grade I knew to be a gift. At that point, Dr. Bloom never promised to give me a better grade, but what she gave me was the time I needed to prove that I could not only give "A" effort but could also produce an "A" product.

With the incomplete, Dr. Bloom also gave me the best piece of advice of all: to take a break from writing. It is also significant that this break corresponded with the break between semesters. All my courses from the fall were complete, and, with the exception of the holidays, all I had to occupy me was my thesis. I used the time to complete much needed historical research, as part of my difficulty stemmed from unanswered, but answerable, historical questions. I also read some books on writing, namely John Braine's *Writing a Novel* and Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. I do not think that reading these before I began writing in the first semester would have been helpful. It was after struggling without any formal instructions that advice in this form meant something to me. I wrote a complete summary of my novella in a page and a half and used this as a guide. Starting again in January, after a break of about a month, gave me only about four months to write 200 pages, so I knew that quantity was also important. I wrote feverishly in the weeks before the spring semester started so that I would both have something to give to Dr. Bloom as evidence of my good faith effort and also to have a running head start before the responsibilities of other classes crowded my schedule.

I know that my concern over my grade forced Dr. Bloom to tell me to stop writing for a time, but I am glad for that. Things would have ended completely differently had Dr. Bloom given me an "A" initially or had I allowed the "A-" to stand without comment. I knew what I had written was not up to standard, but in the same way that a deadline is an effective motivator, so is a bad grade. It made me angry that I had failed to achieve at the highest level, and I put all my energy into ensuring that it would not happen again. Which is not to say that I can only be motivated by grades; I always try to do my best. Usually, however, my best is an "A" and this time I had to find a new best, I had to extend myself to reach "A" level. Dr. Bloom handled the situation beautifully and turned what could have been a disaster into an opportunity for remarkable improvement.

Were there any points at which you felt particularly discouraged or dissatisfied with your work (as all writers-in-progress do)? Where did these occur, and how did you either overcome them or work around them?

No, there were not any points at which I felt more discouraged or dissatisfied than others. A low level of frustration always buzzes in the background of everything I do, and writing my novella was no different. In retrospect, my writing during the first semester was dissatisfying, but, when I was writing it, it was the best I could do. I was trying too hard and forcing things, and the results reflected that. Things that could have been discouraging, such as difficulties with plot or the discovery of an historical reality incongruent with my plan, were not. Instead, I enjoyed working through these puzzles to create a stronger, more coherent piece. The most discouraging thing about my project was having to attend other classes and fulfill their requirements at the same time. I think that I became most discouraged when other obligations robbed me of time to work on writing. I overcame these through planning and complete hermitage in my dorm room.

What was the effect on your growth and development as a writer of being allowed to find your own way into the project and to become a writer on your own terms? What would the effect of too much (in my opinion) advice too soon have been on your work?

Dr. Bloom allowed me to teach myself with the understanding that knowledge accumulated through trial and error is often the most potent and long-lasting. My writing from the first semester, which I regard as unreadable, was not an unmitigated failure but a much better teacher than a series of exercises from a creative writing book. If Dr. Bloom had heavily edited that writing, I know that I would have spent my time polishing something hopelessly tarnished instead of forging ahead with the learning process. Too much advice too soon would have made me doubt my ability to write at all. I would have felt attacked, become stubborn, and defended my earliest writing on principle. Instead, I was able to see its flaws myself and correct them. I think Dr. Bloom's style of advising was suited perfectly to me. If I had initiated my thesis with a strong creative writing background, earlier and more thorough critique would have been appropriate. Dr. Bloom understood that I was finding my way in writing as much as I was working towards a completed piece.

Did reading analogous fiction help?

Reading analogous fiction was an indispensable tool in my writing. Once I began writing myself, I saw other writers as potential teachers. I ceased being able to read a book without evaluating what the author was saying and how he was saying it. I took notes on techniques that seemed effective and flinched at those that failed, often ones that I had used unsuccessfully myself. Seeing professional writers do things that I was doing gave me confidence that I could complete my project. The most significant piece of analogous fiction that I read was *The Virgin Blue* by Tracy Chevalier. The story is about a woman who moves with her husband to a small town in France. While there she not only struggles with the customs and language, of which she has an elementary command, but also with her own family history. The chapters in the book alternate between this contemporary woman's story and that of a distant relative. This organization I found very effective and my decision to utilize it in my own writing gave me a solid foundation when I began to write again.

Anything else you want to say?

I want to say that completing my thesis with Dr. Bloom was one of the most rewarding experiences of my undergraduate career. It was most certainly difficult at times, but I could not have scripted it better. Without the setbacks the results would have been much less valuable. I hope someday to turn my novella into a novel.

Playing the Hunches, Hitting the Jackpot

Well, there you have it. Two gamblers, one novella, a happy story. I trusted Carla to be highly motivated to do the best job she could, to be concurrently reflective and self-critical while writing ten-fifteen pages a week, to focus on the big picture throughout most of the process, and not to get bogged down in the minutiae of text-editing until near the end. Her work verifies my experience in directing other long term projects—honors and master's theses and doctoral

dissertations. I always gamble that the students will win—that they'll do good work and finish their projects. And I hedge my bets with time-tables, substantive advice, occasional nagging, pots of tea. Though the students don't always agree, I regard the semester's inexorable march, the registrar's inevitable reckoning, as implicit allies in the process.

But what's going on here? My review of the extensive academic literature on mentoring—there are thousands of articles and books theoretical and practical—reveals no explicit discussion of this intuitive process or its dynamics as applied to students working on large, long projects, though what Mary Belenky and her co-authors say about *Women's Ways of Knowing* is of relevance. Yet to the extent that teaching is a lively art rather than a codifiable science, I suspect that most teachers work intuitively with their students some of the time—perhaps all of the time with creative writing students, whose work-in-progress requires continual fine-tuning.

So why don't teachers talk much about the role of intuition in teaching? As with talking about love, the subject may seem too ineffable, too student- or situation-specific, too touchy-feely. Might good teaching lose too much in the translation if we try to codify intuitive knowledge into plans or rules for action? Yet, if we look in different places, illustrations of analogous processes abound. Space does not permit here an analysis of numerous biographies and autobiographies of how high achievers get results in a variety of fields. But consider, for example, George Washington's invention of brilliant, unorthodox battle strategies derived in part from his surveyor's intimate knowledge of the literal lay of the land, traversed—as his diaries reveal—on horseback in all kinds of weather. Or examine Nobel prizewinner Barbara McClintock's intuitive discovery of "jumping genes," brilliantly documented in Evelyn Fox Keller's *A Feeling for the Organism*.

Two current books, both by *New Yorker* staff writers, are of particular contemporary relevance: Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* and Atul Gawande's *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*. Both illustrate the ways in which experts gamble on intuitive hunches, with extremely high stakes—life and death being the highest—etched against the possibility of enormous failure. That I say "illustrate" rather than "provide a step-by-step analysis of a rational process" is in itself telling.

Blink opens with an illustration that epitomizes the expert at work. In 1983 the Getty Museum wanted to make a major purchase, "a marble statue dating from the sixth century BC," a seven-foot, glowingly beautiful kouros "sculpture of a nude male youth," which unlike most of the two hundred other extant kouroi, was "almost perfectly preserved"(3). Before making such a major investment, experts engaged by the Getty spent fourteen months authenticating the statue's provenance (when and where was it found?), design (did it resemble other known kouroi?), and age (how old was it, according to the most accurate measures of electronic spectrometry and microscopy?). Satisfied of its authenticity, the Getty paid \$10 million and put the kouros on display—to the surprise of still other experts. Thomas Hoving, former director of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, took one look at it—it "didn't look right," it appeared too "fresh." Making an immediate judgment, he asked the Getty directors, "Have you paid for this?" "If you have, try to get your money back. . . . If you haven't, don't" (6).

Concludes Gladwell, summarizing the immediate reaction—"intuitive repul-

sion”—of Hoving and other well-informed skeptics, “In the first two seconds of looking—in a single glance—they were able to understand more about the essence of the statue than the team at the Getty was able to understand after fourteen months” (3-8). Gladwell devotes the rest of *Blink*’s 277 pages to exploring how experts make instant, generally accurate decisions. As a rule they do not proceed deliberately, “logically and systematically” comparing “all available options”—a process which, in fact, might lead them astray, as it did the willing believers at the Getty: “That is the way people are taught to make decisions, but in real life it is much too slow” (107). Instead, as on the battlefield, they shoot first and ask questions afterward; they “size up a situation almost immediately and *act*, drawing on experience and intuition and a kind of rough mental simulation” (107). Analyses and explanations follow, rather than precede, the actions.

Gawande, too, addresses doctors’ uncertainty, and its relation to intuition. Doctors are “supposed to have the answers. We want to have the answers,” but “the core predicament of medicine . . . is uncertainty” (228-29). Successful diagnosis and treatment indeed rest on a reservoir of knowledge that continues to expand as the doctor learns from experience with lots of patients with a variety of problems.¹ Nevertheless, in life-threatening situations, decisions often have to be made in a “blink” moment, based on hunches, suspicions, guesses, inferences, derived from this knowledge base but not articulated. Here Gawande draws, as does Gladwell, on Gary Klein’s analyses of the ways firefighters make decisions in *Sources of Power*: “Human beings have an ability to simply recognize the right thing to do sometimes. Judgment, Klein points out, is rarely a calculated weighing of all options, which we are not good at anyway, but instead an unconscious form of pattern recognition” (Gawande 248).

To illustrate the making of a “decision under uncertainty” Gawande, at the time a senior surgical resident, anatomizes the case of Eleanor, a twenty-three-year-old woman with “a red and swollen leg.” Was it cellulitis, a “simple skin infection,” though “a bad one”—and therefore treatable with antibiotics? Or was it necrotizing fasciitis, a much rarer but “highly aggressive,” “rapidly invasive” streptococcus infection, impervious to antibiotics, that “kills up to 70 percent of the people who get it”? (229-33). He had seen such a rapidly escalating case a few weeks before, and—despite extensive and repeated surgery to remove the infected areas—the patient died. When two days of antibiotics failed to affect Eleanor’s infection, the only accurate way to diagnose her disease would be to biopsy the site. Was this the right thing to do?

Had time permitted, Gawande could have spent a “couple of days” employing a methodical, rational approach using “decision analysis,” common in business and the military, to lay out all the options, “and all the possible outcomes of these options.” He could have consulted colleagues and the literature, weighing the probability and desirability of the options and choosing

¹ “Three decades of neuropsychology research have shown us numerous ways in which human judgment, like memory and hearing, is prone to systematic mistakes. The mind overestimates vivid dangers, falls into ruts and manages multiple pieces of data poorly. It is affected by the order in which information is represented and how problems are framed. And even if we doctors believed that, with all our training and experience, we escape such fallibilities, the notion was dashed when researchers put us under the microscope” (Gawande 238).

“the one with the highest calculated ‘expected utility’”—the best outcome for the patient. “The goal is to use explicit, logical, statistical thinking instead of your gut” (241). That analysis, Gawande determined after the fact, would have argued against a biopsy, because “the likelihood of my initial hunch being right was too low, and the likelihood that catching the disease early would make no difference anyway was too high” (241-42). But Gawande had minutes, not days, to decide. Trusting his intuition, and reinforced by two other physicians’ views that they couldn’t rule out the unlikely though rare possibility, he chose the biopsy, which revealed necrotizing fasciitis. His instant decision to treat medicine as an art imposed on a science was right; immediate and later surgery saved Eleanor’s leg, and her life.

Still Rolling the Dice

Hoving, Gawande, and I could have been wrong—each or all of us—every time we make a professional judgment, however well-intended, however well-informed. If Gawande had practiced prudent rather than intuitive medicine and Eleanor had died—as she would have without the biopsy—would he have told the story beyond the confines of the hospital’s routine weekly Mortality and Morbidity in-house conferences? I doubt it. For professional literature in general, like autobiography and biography and most teacher narratives, abounds in success stories; failure is the essence of fiction, which believing that “happy families are all alike,” has a profound distrust of the cheerful. Would I have spent this much time telling you about Carla if her thesis had been only a B, which for an honors student is equivalent to failure? Probably not—although I have, in fact—with embarrassment—analyzed my worst class ever in “Subverting the Academic Masterplot.”

For when my students fail, I believe I’ve failed as a teacher. With every student, honors or not, it’s a roll of the dice; the possibility of failure keeps us ever humble—the odds of success, ever hopeful. ☐

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