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Introduction: Finding Meaning on the Road to Hell

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SPECIAL SECTION: CREATIVE WRITING IN HIGHER EDUCATION:
WHERE ARE WE GOING? WHERE HAVE WE BEEN?

Introduction: Finding Meaning on the Road to Hell

Wendy Ryden

The following is excerpted from a letter I wrote for my 2022 spring semester creative nonfiction class, which met for its last session the day after the leaked document surfaced from the Supreme Court signaling the end of *Roe V Wade*.

It's been a long-standing practice for me to remain relatively silent on the last class meeting when everyone reads their reflections aloud. It's important, I think, for the last words of our course to be the class's words and not mine. After all, you've heard enough of me by this point.

But I'm moved today to break that tradition. I don't know that I'll ever do it again, or that it's a good idea to do it this time. I'm not sure of much these days.

Except this: that our world is not in a good way. Typically, on occasions like these, the facilitator offers words of inspiration and hope and charges everyone to live up to their potential and do great things, to embrace the world, etc. Well, I do want you to live up to your potential, and I can tell you that the time we've spent together has been a great gift. I am moved by your stories, your perspectives, your struggles and the way so many of you have let us in, pushed yourselves, and have progressed with your writing.

But I'm pretty short on offering inspiration and hope. Rather than pretend otherwise, instead I give you the highest level of respect that I know how: to tell you what I really think. This is not a good world that you are going to spend the rest of your lives in, and I see no clear path by which it will get any better.

When I talk to my psychiatrist about the country's, the world's prospects, he, in his eighties, tells me this has never been a good place. "I went to medical school in Mississippi in the sixties," he says. "I know."

And I don't disagree, of course. But it's not nostalgia for a better time from which we've slipped that I'm feeling. It's not that things were once so great, it's that in so many ways they keep getting worse and worse. I don't need to go through the list. The shrink is right: there's never been a great time. But there have been times when we might have glimpsed a way forward, what we might have called progress. I'm not seeing that now. I think of the lyrics from the poet/song writer Leonard Cohen: "everybody knows the fight was fixed; everybody knows the good guys lost." He died in the fall of 2016 at a ripe old age. I wonder what he'd think today.

So in my despair, what keeps me going? The desire to make things better, sure, but—and here's the odd thing—not because I believe it's even possible. I mean, I hope so, to make things better, that is, but that's not why I try. I do it simply because trying is the right thing to do. Trying to make a difference is the only way I know to live something like an authentic and meaningful existence. Notice I don't say happy, but meaningful.

So here's my ask: find out what the right thing is and, please, do it—take action. And here's my elder's statement to you: happiness is transient. It will come and go. It's not a happy

life I wish for you all but a meaningful life. If there's one thing I hope that you can take away from learning about creative nonfiction it's that meaningfulness is within our grasp. Why do we write? We write to find meaning; we write to create it. For ourselves. For others.

The rest of my missive finishes with an inside joke that only members of the class would get, so I don't repeat it here (too bad—it's funny—and we probably need all the laughs we can get, because, as we know, things only got worse following that leaked opinion). So here I leave off at the point where I think the essays in this special section of *JAEPL* begin: the question of meaning; the question of "why."

The journalist Nicolas Niarchos, writing about the Russian-Ukrainian war, resurrects the age-old question: "What does art matter when people are dying, starving, and being raped?" (29). It's the vein of question that comes up when we talk about creative writing, for those sympathetic as much as unsympathetic to the arts, both for the general public as well as for academics and administrators, when the institutional push for professionalization is on with a vengeance. (And the cliché seems apt; there does seem something vengeful about the way our universities clamor for the transactional and monetizable almost as though to make up for any time, real or imagined, of an elitist humanistic reign in the academy.) Long before the war started, before *Dobbs V Jackson Women's* was decided, I asked, in the call for papers for this special issue, that contributors consider the role of CW in higher education. Is it a luxury elective with little to no practical value? Or is it a hard-working, performative genre vital to our personal and societal well-being?

As you have probably divined, I *want* it to be the latter. I want to practice and teach creative writing that matters in a world going to hell, and I want to learn more about how I can do that. As you will see, our contributors do, too. I welcome their essays as pieces that help us struggle with that why and that how.

Work Cited

Niarchos, Nicholas. "Giselle Goes to War." *The Nation*, 6 June 2022, pp. 28-31.