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English 910

11 September 1997

There's No Place Like Home, There's No Place Like Home:

Me and The Academy

It's a terrifically bright day at Southern Oregon State College in Ashland Oregon, and the glare from the sun is making me see the world through quarter opened eyes. I'm in my Dad's office at the "Cawedge," and I've just convinced my sister to throw her paper airplane out the window. It heads out the window and instantly—as if transmuted from paper to lead by some sort of reverse philosopher's stone—it bolts towards the concrete sidewalk below. "Kaboom!" I shout. "Boom" says my sister. Then we both giggle like people who've mysteriously lost their frontal lobes.

Now it's my turn, and I'm ready to throw a piece of scratch paper (probably an old handout of my Dad's) that I've made into a garish paper-airplane. My creation is full of stick people, and it has a fiery gaping mouth, a five year old's version of a Spitfire's paint job. I lightly throw the plane out the window, and, amazingly, it purposefully meanders through the air like a brook trout.

I turn towards my sister and say, "Mine went further cause it had a face."

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In the searing clarity that hindsight affords, I think even at five I knew that I would some day need to struggle to make a place, create a face, in the academy. I mean how else can explain one of my earliest, clearest memories—a memory that seems a ready made metaphor.

But what sort of metaphor?

I don't think I can answer that question—at least not yet. What I can say is this: at five I loved the people my father worked with because they gave me paper and pens to play with (I'm still playing with them); I loved the smell of the college halls (paper meets dust and old books); and I loved the fact that when I walked down the hall near my Dad's office that shadows on the walls seemed like, perhaps even were, people—people who might tell me stories.

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It's late afternoon and my Western Civ. study group is sitting on the lawn in front of Stafford Hall at the University of Oregon, my home away from my 4x6 "home." The night before was a beery affair for most of us, and we are all now squinting due to a rare March appearance of Eugene's anemic sun. Eventually we stop talking about who threw up, who left the party with whom, and who tossed on whom, and we start—slowly and individually—to fill in our study guides.

Five minutes after a monastic silence has been established, a friend turns to me and says, "Chris, you like this shit. Do you know three effects of the industrial revolution?"

I pause, and then, for some unknown reason I'm suddenly eloquent about events that are only dim, sepia tinted facts to me. After I answer my friend's question, other people start asking questions—and I know the answers. I find myself saying things like, "The rise of the Luddites was directly tied to the rise of industry in England;" "Yes, Lord Byron fought in Greece—enthralled with the idea of his own glory and Greece's freedom;" and "No, Spain had ceased to be a major colonial power by mid-century."

The questions and answers cascaded around our little group for about thirty minutes, and with each minute that passes I become increasingly animated—my hands and voice singing a sort of contrapuntal academic tune.

At the end of my holding forth my friend, who asked the first question, turns to me and says, “You explained that better than our teacher.”

“That’s not saying a hell of a lot,” I say.

“No, you’re really good. You really helped me understand this stuff.”

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The moment my friend complimented my “teaching,” and the moment that I realized that I had helped her learn something, was the moment that I was hooked. I was sure (as sure as one can be at 19) that I wanted to be a teacher. I even remember thinking at the time—maybe even saying it out loud—that I wanted to teach college. Maybe this pronouncement was prophecy, or maybe it was a variant form of homesickness. I missed my dog, my Mom and Dad, my house—maybe my desire to teach college was simply a freshman’s desire to see my home at Southern Oregon State College again.

However, I’m tempted to say that there was more to it than that because I now remember (just as I’m writing) how my friend looked when she complimented my proto-teaching. Her eyes were wide open (in spite of what I can only assume would have been a tremendous hang-over) and she (a fun-loving woman) was intently serious that I “take” her compliment. She seemed grateful for my slight knowledge, and I could tell that by the light, an almost blue green fire, that flashed briefly in her eyes. I’ve since seen this “learning look” in my students’ eyes, and I swear that this look is more addictive than any of the many recreational drugs I took during my lost college years.

I've spent the last six years of my life feeding my need for that look—looking for the same face in my students that my friend gave me that day.

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It's 3 p.m. on a gray Friday in Hillsboro, Oregon—a day that feels like its covered in soot. I have been grading for an hour, before that I had been calling an alcoholic parent of an 8th grader, and before that I had been telling a young Hispanic kid that he can't throw gang signs in class. I feel, by 3 am, as if I can hear the slow hiss-burn of my braincells dying in droves. I haven't thought as a writer and reader, a real critical writer and reader, in three years. I can fill out forms (IEPs and class logs), and I can read education journals ("Critical thinking and sentence combining are not contradictory"), but I'll be damned if I could put together even one sentence that would move any reader (no matter how desperate for reading material) to say "This is true." My love of teaching has brought me to a place where deep readings and rigorous writing are not as important as filling in forms and negotiating momentary peaces between warring students. Some days, when getting up at six a.m. to head to school, I look in the mirror and barely recognize my face.

But for the moment, I now push my papers aside, rub my forehead, pick up a magazine on my desk, and think "I've got to do something about this. In a couple of years I won't have two brain cells to rub together."

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I did do something about my atrophying critical thinking skills and the feeling that I had copped out on becoming a real college teacher, but of course not immediately. It took me two months from the time of my despairing, and nearly subconscious, career evaluation to actually go to Portland State University, in Portland, Oregon, and pick up a graduate school application, and

it took me two more months—just before I was losing my job due to my school district’s dependence on non-renewable grant funding for alternative schools—before I actually convinced myself that I was going to get my MA at Portland State University (PSU).

However, by my last day as an 8th grade At-Risk teacher, I was elated that I was going to return home—return to the academy. I was certain that at PSU I would create work that was rigorous, intellectually sophisticated, and true. I knew that I could create a true face in the academy; not a mask, but a real flesh and blood creation—with bones made of ink, bond paper, and my five year old vision of stories being told in shadowy halls.

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I’m meeting with my advisor at PSU, and we are in an office that is an homage to low bid contracting and institutional green paint. My advisor, who I’m co-teaching with, has just told me about a meeting she had with an unhappy student, and then this woman, a woman I respect more than anyone else at PSU says “Chris do you remember that paper you wrote about Gertrude Stein and Helena Zenna Smith for class last Spring.”

“Yeah, what about it,” I said—by now unperturbed by my advisors’ tendency to astral travel during the course of a conversation.

“I was surprised that you didn’t jump off a cliff with it, like you do when you speak in class.”

“Nancy, what are you talking about?”

“You didn’t take any risks. It was a good workman like paper, but you didn’t take any risks.”

I look at Nancy and I think “I wrote a workman like paper? Jesus.”

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I can't be entirely sure how much of the above conversation is entirely accurate, but I'm certain that Nancy (my beloved advisor and mentor) told me that I didn't "jump off a cliff" with my ideas for my paper, and that I had written "workman" like prose. For some reason this bothered me, and I think it bothered me because I knew that Nancy was right. I had forgotten, by the start of my second year at Portland State, to put a face on my work. It was as if I was singing an old blues tune—a song wrapped in whisky, racism, and regret—note for note, but I was forgetting that the soul of the song lived in the blue, broken place between perfect notes. I was creating papers, but I wasn't creating a face.

Three months later, for another class, I dragged out my paper of wooden prose (it felt like a plank of paper-like wood in my hands) and started carving the hell out of it. The paper I carved, whittled, and pasted together had me in it (literally, I was a character in it); it reflected my interests (I addressed the possibility of a gendered rhetoric of World War I); and it was academically rigorous (I spent days in the library researching woman's speech, World War I, and Edith Sitwell—who replaced Gertrude Stein in this new, revised paper). After the two weeks of rewrites ended, I had created a true face out of paper (the wood I crafted with), and this new face resembled—in some strange way—the fiery and fierce face of the plane I tossed out of my Dad's window twenty plus years ago. I had created a document that was both personal, political, and academic, and I damn well knew that as soon as I read it. I was elated, Nancy was proud, and my teacher for the class I turned it in for (who had seen the previous paper) remarked "This is a helluva a lot better than your first paper."

Elation is, however, short lived.

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It is late May 1997, around two a.m., and I am in the middle of my first mandated rewrite ever.

It all started with another Portland State mentor gently telling me that I had failed to create a paper for her class that was “in tune” enough with “Academic Discourse.” I was told that my use of the personal “I” didn’t make sense in terms of the assignment I had been given (to do a rhetorical analysis of gendered rhetoric in the war poetry of World War I). In short, I had crafted a face that was ugly to the academy—deformed lips speaking a lisping rasp of ignorance. No lilting tones issued forth from my “truthful” academic face.

I had screwed up.

So, this paper I’m writing, in the middle of a oily aired night, is not a labor of love, and I think that I’ll be lucky if it ever becomes workman-like prose. This is not the joyful revision process of which Donald Murray speaks; its an unending reminder of how much of an imposture I am as an academic—how ugly my face is in the halls I’ve walked through for 29 years.

With each revision I make, with each word I tweak, the paper—and what seems like my real face—slips away from me. It’s a child I can’t save from the current, and I know that I’m both the child and the helpless rescuer.

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Three years later I am still trying to make sense of the paper I rewrote at Portland State University, and all the face hunting that preceded it. At times I see my mandated rewrite not as punishment, but as an opportunity to negotiate a different face for the academy: a stern, unlaughing face that wears the requisite wire rims of the academic. A harsh but necessary face.

But at other times, I want to scream that “It’s not my face” and go back to trying to throw airplanes through windows—trying to write the essay that is personal and academic and mine.

However, lately I've begun to think (in brief moments of rest—Sleep's thin, left hand cradling my cheek) that I'm surrounded by a myriad of faces—some fat, some thin, some inviting, some sneering, and some of them are merging even as I write, like a dadaist's attempt at using computer morphing.

Perhaps the answer to my problem of creating a face can be found in the swirl of faces about me. Maybe someday I can give these faces tongues of paper—tongues that will let all the faces have voices of beautiful jet-colored written words. And maybe—just maybe—these voices can start stories—stories that each face will hear, understand, and respect. Right now, it seems to be the most that I can hope for.