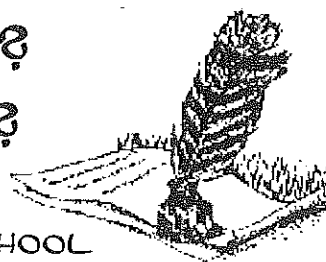


WHY TEACHING? WHY ENGLISH?

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The first five times I started this essay, I tried referring to some lines I really like from the Paul Mariani poem "North/South" in which the poet describes his own writing:

What *you* have
is a case of free hurtling
after form. Count yourself among

the lucky ones who still have
something to come home to.

Although this poem is about writing, I think it could easily be about teaching. There's a form to teaching, motions we all go through because they work, lectures and handouts and quizzes; but the true joys of teaching English come in those moments (and it's often literature that gets us there) that lesson plans can't control, the ones that arrive free form: discussions that are sparked by excited students responding to the words and ideas we put before them. At those moments I find, as a teacher, something to come home to—my own past as a student, my own engagement with the literature, my own love of words.

The problem with the passage above, however, is that it doesn't really take into account the problem I'm having with my air conditioner.

The problem with my air conditioner is not new. It's been going on ever since I took my present teaching job two years ago. It's not something they told me about

in the interview, and it's not covered in the employee handbook. As far as I can remember from my college education courses (particularly ED 201: Methods and Sources, the syllabus for which actually included the professor's helpful enjoinder, "Think your students might eat you alive? Let me help!"), there is no part of Bloom's Taxonomy that deals with air conditioner trouble in the classroom. Here, I am on my own. Air conditioner territory, I imagine, is where new teachers prove themselves or are broken entirely.

The problem with my air conditioner is this: it is in the back of the classroom. There are precisely twenty-two desks between my dry erase board and the air conditioner, and during most periods, there are students in all of them. While I am wearing a shirt, tie, and coat, these students are wearing the least clothing our dress code might possibly allow. Because spaghetti straps are forbidden, the girls are wearing what might be called linguini straps. The boys are wearing shorts and they are all wearing sandals. They complain that it is too cold in my room. They sneak into my room between classes and turn off the air conditioner, which I seldom notice until I am well into a heated discussion about Grendel's mother and discover that my sweat has beaded on the dry erase board where I erase things, of course, with the side of my hand in my excitement. They ignore the little signs I

post on the air conditioner dial that read, for instance, "Do not touch," or the more subtle, "Now is the winter of our brisk content," or even my paraphrase of Prufrock: "I grow cold. . . I grow cold. . . / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers. . . ." Nothing works; the air conditioner mysteriously turns off and none will admit to the crime.

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 BECAUSE
 IT'S WORTH IT.

But this air conditioning thing really gets to me.

There are a lot of other things to deal with during the school day. Here—no kidding—is what I've done so far today: called two parents, attended a meeting as co-chair of the school fundraising drive, met with three students to talk about an assignment that's due by the end of the day, typed three poems for the school literary magazine, tried to figure out the

This, of course, is not why I began teaching English in the first place. The air conditioning war has become an ongoing battle that I have no time for. Why *did* I start teaching English? Because I love literature. I love the possibilities literature and writing afford my students. I love the inescapable train of ideas that courses through a classroom with the discussion of a single sentence, a poem, or a novel. I love the music and art of words in pleasing combinations and the reaction of students who share that passion. Most of all, I love the particular way in which high-school students engage literary works, with a mix of enthusiasm, skepticism, sophistication, silliness, and desire for voices and ideas

THE ANSWERS IN LITERATURE . . . (ARE) FORTUNES, EARNED & BUILT THROUGH WORK & THOUGHT, SPENT IN A DAY AND REMEMBERED FOR A LIFETIME.

that will speak to them honestly and with force. On any given day, I encounter more laughter, eagerness, insight, passion, and intensity than I've ever seen at another job, and it brings out the best in

me, as well. I still teach for all these reasons. computer glitch that's keeping me from submitting my attendance properly, stood in front of the school for twenty minutes supervising morning traffic, watched a study hall, made photocopies for my classes tomorrow, returned about a dozen emails from other teachers and administrators, moved the desks in my room into a circle, then back into rows, then back into a circle, and finally into rows again, wrote five first drafts of this essay (which came out so campy that I thought of renaming the thing "Chicken Soup for the English Teacher's Soul") and taught two sections of Senior English, one class of AP English, an International Studies class, and Creative Writing. Before I go home I'll also have attended an English Department meeting and a soccer game. And yes, if you too are an English teacher, I know what you're thinking—it's a light day.

But here I am, writing about my air conditioner battle, because I at last realized that this essay should not be about why I started teaching English. It should be about why I *keep* teaching English. Why teaching? Why English? Because it's *worth* it. Because no matter the frustrations I go through on a daily basis, every bit of it disappears when a student writes a successful poem (and knows it), or when someone tells me she loved a book I assigned, or when a class discovers that

there *are* right answers in the study of literature, millions of right answers. They aren't the same for everyone, of course. They aren't like the answers to a math problem. They aren't pennies that you pick up off the ground, stick in your pocket, and own. They're fortunes, earned and built through work and thought, spent in a day and remembered for a lifetime.

Later in Paul Mariani's poem he describes poets as birds with wings strengthened "half by years of trial / and half again by luck." That's how we all teach, by years of trial and by luck. The years of trial will teach me, eventually, how to keep my classroom cold and my students happy at the same time. The luck allows me to teach English. The luck is what makes kids want to read. The luck is what put me in a place where I get paid to talk about words. There's no better place for anyone to practice spreading his or her wings other than in an English classroom.

I'll be spreading mine, I hope, while my students spread theirs, for a long time to come.

In the meantime, you'll find me with a screwdriver, just taking the darn dial off the air conditioning unit once and for all.

