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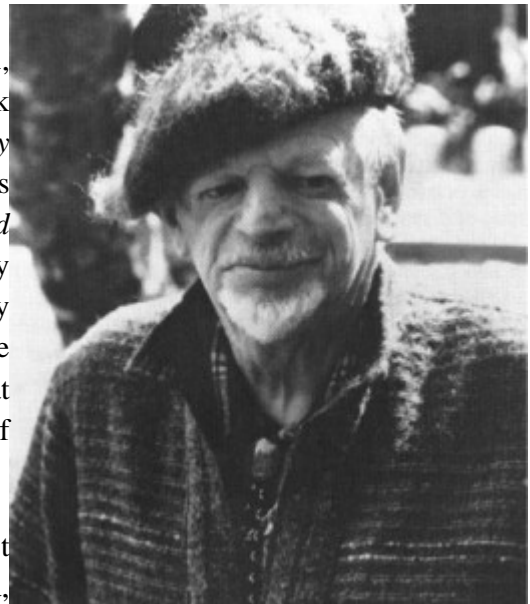
Homage to Teachers

Eric · Wednesday, January 7th, 2015

General Constance Greene. Lieutenant Colonel Joan Colaprete. Those are the names of the two “teachers” in my life. Both high school English teachers. Both members of the legion of “teachers” we all hopefully remember from our childhoods throughout the course of our lives. Both were strong and unrelenting. Both eccentric and inspiring. They set the bar high so their students could rise. They got the best out of us. And they planted the seed in me, for the hunger to learn.

I use the word “teacher” as an homage to the great John Steinbeck, the Mark Twain of the mid-twentieth century, and perhaps even a better novelist than Twain.

A precise, frequently funny, but always impassioned, wordsmith who was popular in his own time, Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Cannery Row*, and *East of Eden*, amongst others, but in his wonderful collection of non-fiction, *America and Americans*, he uses the word “teacher” in a most worthy and grateful way. He doesn’t say “great teacher” or “my best teachers”; he just says “teachers”, of which he claims he had three. One in high school, one in college at Stanford, and one, a lifelong friend, Ed Ricketts, all of whom helped form him as a writer and as a man.



Of course, Constance Green was not a general. We just called her that. For that’s how we thought of her. Blond, lean, always precise and rigidly on time, Mrs. Greene, Ed Ricketts who was astonishingly maybe only 27 years old at the time she taught English at W. Tresper Clarke High School in Westbury, Long Island, in the early 60s before “the shit hit the fan”, the general flaunted a sprayed-down Jackie Kennedy-inspired flip hairdo that never had a single hair out of place.

We had her 1st period, 8:26 in the morning, and whereas we had just woken up, walked to school, and sloughed our way through home room, the General met us at the door of her classroom, already well-caffeinated, with 20 new words of vocabulary perfectly hand-written on the green chalk board. We were all in the “E” class, the “eccelerated” class (spelled with an “e” instead of an

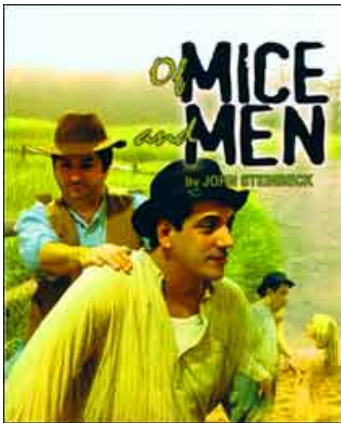
“a”?), but we were lucky if we knew the meaning of four or five of these cantankerous words. Geotropic. Sequester. Plumage. Abducent. Decussate. Huh?

But rest assured, we knew the meanings the next day because, believe you me, we were firmly tested on our knowledge. And should we fail to produce the expected results in oral quizzes each morning, we were let known about it... loudly and clearly... often in front of the rest of our entire class of brainiac draftees. Because no, we didn't enlist in the General's class; we were put there. We were tested, screened, and selected to be there, although none of us were more than the tender age sixteen. And our parents supported the conscription. In fact, they were, most probably, cheerleaders number 1 and 2. They wanted us to learn. To succeed. To get into the best Ivy League colleges we could. To become “their sons, the doctuhs,” or at least “their sons, the lawyuhs.”



It was ruthless. But effective. We learned. Some of us may have been broken or humiliated by the General in the process. I have childhood friends who do *not* remember her so kindly. But with me, the General succeeded. I learned. The carrot and stick worked well with me. I was motivated to learn those vocabulary words. Sabulous. Degust. Analeptic. I still remember these strange and intimidating words. Sometimes I even use them.

But more importantly, the General implanted in me a hunger and appreciation for the power and precision of words. Writers used words, of course. But so did people. Even some sixteen year old like us. Bernee Powell, Dierdre Gluckman, Barbara Macdonald, these girls were really smart. They soaked up these words and Mrs. Greene's pedagogy like sharks do blood. Me? I just worked hard and got bitten...by the hunger to learn, and by the bounty and beauty of the English language.



It happened first though, perhaps the year before, in tenth grade, when they also “put” me in Lieutenant Colonel Joan Colaprete's “E” English class. Joan Colaprete was also lean and tough, maybe an Italian or Sicilian woman in her early twenties. Attractive to 15 year old boys. She had curly brown hair and an occasional toothy smile, but you wouldn't want to get in a fight with her. In 1962, she ferociously taught “the classics” of high school literature... that is, the books she was assigned to have us read: *The Tale of Two Cities*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Silas Marner*, *Silas Lapham*. (Be advised: Never read a book with the name “Silas” in it.)

And read we did. But never carefully enough for Miss Colaprete.

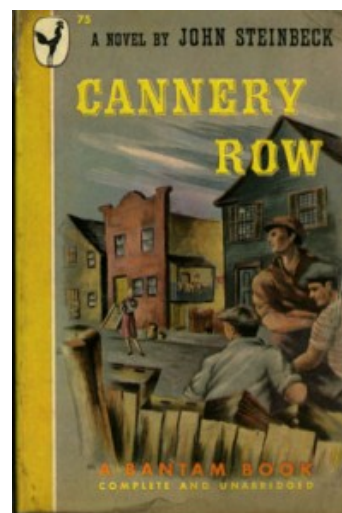
“On page 257, class, what color socks did Silas wear at the school house?”

Huh? She must be kidding. All us brainiacs looked around at each other and twittered. (Not

“tweeted”, but twittered.) She’s kidding, right? Nope.

“On page 462 of *Great Expectations*, Dickens describes Miss Havisham as a cross between a ‘waxwork’ and a what?”

None of us knew the answers to Miss Colaprete’s ridiculously detailed questions. We failed her tests. All of us, over and over. But we learned to read more carefully. A *lot* more carefully. We learned to pay attention to detail. That words had power and precision. The same lesson that would be reinforced the next year by commander in chief, General Greene.



Miss Colaprete also taught me how to write. Yes, even in 10th grade, she taught me how to construct sentences, how to put them together in an effective and sometimes, affective, sequence, how to create a compositional essay that would have to stand me in good stead for the rest of my life. She even taught me poetry. Iambic pentameter. Trochaic tetrameter. My first poem ever, in adolescent anapestic trimeter:

“On a hill in the night, stood a church with a light.

It gave hope, it gave aid, to a man, to a maid.”

Great stuff, right? Ok, maybe not so great.

But thanks to Miss Colaprete, I learned how to write. She never gave out a grade above 89%. Never 90%, good enough for an “A”. No, always 84%, 79%, sometimes, 42%. She drove home how hard it was to get an “A” from her. How hard it was going to be to succeed in life. This was shocking and unacceptable for all us “A-type” personalities in her class. But she knew what she was doing. She kept us motivated, always trying to earn that elusive “A”. We never did. I never did. Until the end of the year, when she gave me the only grade that counted, the one that went on my permanent high school transcript. 92%!

And then somehow, by an unpredictable and not so simple twist of fate, I became a teacher myself. This semester, Autumn 2014, is the first Fall in 28 years that I have not taught theater to students at USC. I am “semi-retired” now, only 3 more Spring semesters to go. And before USC, I was teaching modern dance at Columbia College in Chicago and clowning in New York City through The Learning Exchange, and well... perhaps I’ve always been a teacher... even before I became an artist.

✖ I remember the first time I was struck by the fact that I could teach. I was 12 years old, studying for my Bar Mitzvah in Hebrew School, of course, at the reform temple in Westbury Long Island, where my parents were, disgracefully, not even members of the congregation. Mr. Tarshish was the bald, ineffectual teacher of the class, where he taught us how to read the Hebrew language, backwards from right to left, phonetically, so we could sound it out correctly for the “Haftorah” part of our Bar Mitzvah service when we “became a man” at age 13 and joined the community of reformers.

The problem was that Mr. Tarshish never taught us the *meaning* of the words we sounded out. It was a foolish and impossibly hard way to learn a language. And a complete waste of time... except of course, for the once in a lifetime, Saturday morning, Bar Mitzvah ceremony, which, when it came down to it, was all that really mattered.

In the class with me was Marvin Pishkowitz, a soft-faced, gentle boy of twelve who was one of my best friends. Marvin was good at marbles and kickball and at collecting Topps baseball cards. He was not good at languages. And he certainly was completely hopeless in Mr. Tarshish’s ill-conceived Hebrew class.

✖

One day, I invited Marvin over to my house on Valentines Road. After peanut butter and jelly sandwiches prepared by my doting Mom, I sat him down, opened a Hebrew book, and explained to him how it worked.

“These funny looking letters on the top are like our English alphabet’s consonants, but backwards, and these dots underneath are the ‘vowels’. But instead of a, e, i, o, u, Hebrew has sounds like ‘ah, eh, oh, uh,’ etc. Get it?”

Marvin shook his head in bewilderment.

But... after about 5 hours, it really started to sink in.



The next Friday, we both showed up for the uselessness of Mr. Tarshish’s class, and lo and behold, when it was Marvin’s turn to read aloud, he... did. Mr. Tarshish was shocked. Completely amazed.

“How did you do that, Marvin?”

Marvin turned bright red with embarrassment and accomplishment.

“Who taught you to do that?”

Marvin looked over at yours Truly, and smiled. Mr. Tarshish said,

“You taught him to read Hebrew? When?”

“Yesterday, Mr. Tarshish.”

“How?” the flabbergasted bald man blurted out disbelievingly.

I explained: something about the vowels and the consonants, and reading slowly, backwards, from left to right. I think Mr. Tarshish may have understood. And on that day, at twelve years old, in Temple Sholom’s tacky Hebrew school classroom, I learned and I came to understand that I could teach.



It has something to do with the ability to understand and explain how something works. Specifically. Of course, many people can understand and be proficient at what they do. They “just do it.” But “explaining” it, breaking it down into a logical pedagogy that progresses from lesson one to the final lesson, that’s a special talent and skill. Too many people buy into the bogus idea, that teachers are failed doers. That only those who can’t do well and succeed themselves resort to teaching. I think that’s not *totally* wrong, but it is often bone-headedly and assumptively wrong.

☒ Teaching is an art form all of its own. It’s not easy to teach. Not only because teachers are never paid enough in our culture (or others), but because it takes patience and understanding and preparation and methodology. Good teachers have a gift. They plant seeds in their students that will blossom and grow long beyond the confines of their classrooms. Teachers are heroically hard workers dedicated to changing the world one student at a time.

I think that’s what Steinbeck means when he generously bestows the moniker, *teacher*, on the three memorable ones he had in his lifetime.

And that’s what I call Constance Greene and Joan Colaprete. Teachers.



I wonder what ever happened to the General and the Lieutenant Colonel. I sort of doubt that they stayed high school English teachers for the rest of their lives. I'll bet they got married, had children, and read a lot of books with a lot of words, throughout their hopefully, long and fruitful lives. But I want to thank them here, today, in the *Cultural Weekly*, a full half century later, during this season of gratefulness and family and memory. If you're still out there, ladies, please know that you each, and both, "made all the difference".

If you live in or near Los Angeles, please come see "AN EVENING WITH ERIC TRULES" on January 17, 2015 at 8pm at Beyond Baroque, LA's most historic and prestigious literary venue. Facebook link: <https://www.facebook.com/events/660916847359466/>

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