# NOT SO GLADLY TEACH

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A colleague in the office where I work is retiring next month. I asked her what she is looking forward to most. "Sunday nights," she said immediately. "I spend so much time stressing out about work on Monday that I've never gotten to enjoy them." As she spoke, I was transported for a moment back to a time in my life I had almost forgotten, a time when I felt the same way about Sunday nights. It was when I was in graduate school pursuing a Ph.D. in literature. More precisely, it was during the semesters when I taught on Monday mornings.

Those Sunday nights. I'd procrastinate the whole weekend and then finally sit down in the early evening to prepare mini-lectures and discussion questions for the next day's class. As a combination reward and distraction, I'd turn on NPR and have it playing in the background. The show *On the Media* was on at that time of night. To this day, I have an unhealthy relationship to *On the Media*. I take almost too much delight in Bob Garfield and Brooke Gladstone's erudite banter, but every time I hear the show's neo-jazz theme music, I feel, along with anticipation, a Pavlovian twinge of despair.

If students were expecting their papers back, I'd start earlier in the day on Sunday, and I would require more than NPR as motivation. So I'd ply myself with miniature individually-wrapped chocolate bars, one for each paper graded. Extra points (chocolates) for not getting out of the dining room chair for the entirety of a paper. My cats loved me then, as my lap would be available for long stretches of time.

Why all the self-bribery and angst? Why, when I had dedicated myself to thinking and talking about Literature with a capital L for the rest of my career, to teaching young people to be critical thinkers and lifelong readers? Why was I dragging my feet before each opportunity to talk about my favorite books for an hour with a captive audience?

Because I was terrible at it.

Here I am in 2005. I walk into the classroom, resisting my usual inclination upon entering a room full of people to blend chameleon-like into the wallpaper. Instead, I stride resolutely up to the front. The students all look at me. Again, I resist the urge to flee. And so far, things are going well, because I have not yet opened my mouth. Once I do, then it all goes downhill. My heart rate increases; I forget to breathe. I talk faster and faster, or, conversely, I forget what I was going to say. Sentences trail off. Words that would flow freely on paper get tangled up and convoluted. I worry that people are laughing at me. (They probably are.) I get distracted from the lecture or discussion by classroom management concerns. Should I confront those two girls whispering to each other, that guy in the back reading the student newspaper? I feel like I'm juggling too many balls at once: the themes of *Pride and Prejudice,* the thread of discussion, the students' attention, and my own neuroses.

Bottom line: in front of a classroom, I always feel like some fake, hammy actor. Or, as a friend in grad school once put it, "When I teach, I feel like a comedian who's bombing really bad." This happened no matter how much or little I prepared. Sometimes I would write out every word of lectures, which guaranteed a stilted delivery. But note cards and outlines were equally dangerous, as they led to improvisation, which too often led to disaster: confusion, fluster, dead air.

I should add that not all this may have been immediately apparent to my students, or at least that they generously chose to overlook my shortcomings. I frequently got positive evaluations. "Really enthusiastic about the subject matter." "An open and democratic classroom." "Relates well to young people." I'm not talking about how it was, necessarily; I'm talking about how it felt to me. And I'm talking about what it did to my Sundays.

These facts about myself took a long time to process, because I have been happily surrounded by teachers for most of my life. My parents spent their careers as math teachers. I idolized my public school teachers and my college professors. I can remember specific classroom experiences that changed my life years, decades later. (Mrs. Eichhorn's eleventh-grade English class lecture on *Beloved*? Still have the notes somewhere.) My husband is a teacher. Looking back, I'm somewhat embarrassed to realize that just about everyone I've even *dated* was a teacher, or was in training to become one, or eventually embraced the profession. Education means home to me; it means love to me; and so learning, for me, has never just been an abstract or intellectual affair: it's personal.

I announced a desire for a teaching career early on and even copied a quote from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* into my high-school journal: "And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche." Throughout my years in school, I churned out A papers and was a good student, if considered a little quiet in class (cue the foreshadowing music). Much later, I ended up in a teaching-intensive Ph.D. program, which is where I got to really cozy up with some of my most unwelcome limitations.

Being an introvert is something that has started to get grudging respect from society, most recently with the 2012 publication of Susan Cain's book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can't Stop Talking*. I am an introvert: there's no question that I get energy from being alone and expend it when I am around others. Whether it's a casual barbeque with friends or a high-stress work presentation, I have to lie down in a darkened room afterward to recharge. I would call this my downfall as a teacher, but that theory is shot to hell by all my friends who are introverts and are wonderful teachers.

I also have another personality quirk that is often confused with introversion but has never quite gotten its due in our culture in the way introversion has: I am shy. In his book *Shyness: A Bold New Approach*, Bernardo J. Carducci describes it as "the discomfort and behavioral inhibition that occurs in the presence of others." I read this book wanting to highlight almost every sentence. But even that isn't the whole story. Shyness and social anxiety in the classroom can be overcome if the motivation is there. From the half million awkward instances of small talk I had with fellow grad students in the halls outside the departmental office—awkward on *both* sides—I'm convinced that there are people suffering from both introversion and shyness who are also successful and dedicated teachers.

Maybe there is some other quality they have that I lack, an X factor, perhaps some kind of performance gene. Actors say that authentic performance comes from being in the moment. I am perhaps the least in-the-moment person who ever lived. I am constantly second-guessing myself, being self-conscious, over-analyzing—traits that make it hard to assume the gravitas of authority. Or maybe it's just that I'm not terribly verbal. I'll write you a tome in an e-mail, but face to face, I clam up. I'm that person who makes exceedingly lame conversation at cocktail parties, the one over whose shoulder people are always glancing, seeking out a more scintillating interlocutor. I can't blame them—I'd rather be at home reading in bed myself.

Worst of all for my self-image (since I have always fancied myself a caring and sensitive person), I learned during my teaching days that I am not really all that patient. Breaking down a concept step by step, or wooing a student to Shakespeare who claims he or she doesn't like to read at all: to my surprise, it turns out these are not challenges I crave. I'm more likely to throw up my hands in the first five minutes and say "I give up!" Ditto, a million times, for parsing the grammar of a poorly written paper and offering constructive criticism.

Could most of these issues be remedied with time, experience, evening improv classes, and the right SSRI cocktail? Perhaps. Maybe the traits and attitudes I am describing can be fixed. But there's also something universal and not, for most people, in need of "fixing" about a desire not to get up regularly in front of a group and blab away. In fact, almost everyone recognizes that public speaking is the single most terrifying proposition in the world. It is number one on many lists of top fears, outranking even the fear of death. Seinfeld's famous joke on that subject is that we'd all rather be the corpse at a funeral than deliver the eulogy.

But not graduate students. They want to deliver the eulogy. Everyone in grad school professes to love teaching, even when they vocally hate everything else about grad school. Of course, that anomaly is not so strange when you think about it. Grad students are a self-selecting group, after all. Only a masochist would throw herself into that world if she didn't feel comfortable doing it.

Heh.

A dear friend since middle school has had occasion to tell me more than once: "Don't push the river; it flows by itself." She's watched me do a lot of things in my life because of a stubborn desire to follow through, despite the proverbial little voice telling me it wasn't going to work out. As a person who tends to over-intellectualize matters, I often lose touch with the answers to the simplest questions: What do I want? What do I not want?

In my defense, much of graduate school wasn't that much of a push against the river. I enjoy reading. I enjoy writing. I enjoy thinking. The themes of *Pride and Prejudice* fascinate me. And it is strangely easy to overlook teaching in a consideration of grad school as a whole. Everyone talks about how you have to minimize its role in your life anyway, prep less, spend more time on your "own work," both in graduate school and later as a professor. I remember the first day of grad school orientation, when a professor told us to avoid the trap of over-investing in our teaching roles. "Don't get sucked in," she said. "It will expand to fill all your time if you let it. Never forget you're here primarily to do your own work. If you have only fifteen minutes to

prep to teach because you're reading for the graduate seminar you're in, so be it." As right and true and important as these messages are, you can start to think that as an academic your real labor will be your research and writing, whether during sabbaticals or in the hours between your classroom hours, and that teaching is just something you have to get through. But the fact is, a teaching career is going to involve quite a lot of teaching. Why choose to spend so much time doing something I will only ever be passable at?

In the background of my life the whole time I was in grad school—always seeming very incidental—was a job. This job was what I did to make money while I was in school, but grad school was always more important than the job. Coursework, teaching, writing my dissertation. The job was so much easier not to think about, because the job was so much easier for me to be good at. Not because it was inherently easier—it takes organization, precision, multitasking, attention to detail. I was recruited for this job by someone who had a hunch that I would be good at it (while no one has ever had a hunch I would be good at teaching). It was, as they say, a good fit. So after I finished getting my doctorate, rather than go on the crushing academic job market, I kept my job.

As it happens, part of my job involves working with college students. One on one, I love working with them in a way I never did when I was their instructor. They are self-selecting, so they are already motivated to be interested in what I'm interested in. I love mentoring them. I love not having to give them a grade.

I suppose I never thought seriously about my job because I considered it inferior to a teaching job. It is, after all, an office job. It is—gasp!—"administrative." If I didn't work at a university, my skill set, which involves familiarity with editing and publishing, might be considered a legitimate profession of its own. But since I do work for a university, and since it is a non-teaching job, it is hence lumped with "administration." Or sometimes, more quaintly, I am referred to as "support staff."

Because grad school is a cult, as Margaret Newhouse and Thomas H. Benton famously postulated in *Chronicle of Higher Education* articles, I was conditioned to believe that anything else would be a lesser job. Sadly, I was part of this cult before I was even in grad school. I temped as a department secretary at a university before leaving to start graduate school in another state. When I told my boss, the chair of the department, that I was leaving and why, he said, "Oh, too bad; you would have had such a great future in administration." I was offended at the time, because *of course* I wanted to be a professor like him. Who wouldn't? Only now do I understand what he was saying to me and why he said it.

People who make the trains run on time are usually not noticed unless a train is late. The thing is, though, I'm pretty good at making the trains run on time. Yes, it is somewhat of a day job, but so is teaching for many a professor. I do not feel one hundred percent self-actualized every minute of my workday; but again, neither does many a professor. Far better to have a day job that comes more naturally to me than one that is difficult.

"I am not my job," I remember hearing (and saying) a lot in my twenties; now that my peer group and I are older, I hear it less and less. As the stakes have gotten higher, "I *am* my job" has become the default assumption. Maybe I need to periodically take time to rethink that. On some

level, all jobs are day jobs. No matter what job I hold, I'm something else inside, as are we all. The reader, the writer, the learner: I'm still that person in love with education.

Maybe I was aspiring to be a teacher when "perpetual student" was really what I was looking for. Luckily, I can always be that. It helps that my job often involves reading and thinking about the written word. But even when I spend the afternoon processing payment vouchers, I can still clock out at the end of the day and go be the person I am, rather than worry about playing a role that has never felt like me.

As my soon-to-retire colleague sketched out her Sunday nights to come, complete with glass of red wine and back-to-back episodes of *MI5*, I came out of my flashback to my previous Sundays of *On the Media*, mini–Hershey's bars, and angst, and realized that since I stopped teaching, I no longer have that same dread before the week begins. Instead, I can do the things people do on a day off: cook dinner, read a book, go for a walk, spend time with friends and family.

My once-scorned office job has given me more than a living. It's given me more than validation of my personality type and my strengths. It's given me my Sundays.