Our Writing Lives

Steeeltown Sister

by WALT PETERSON

Back when I was in high school, Pittsburgh really was a shot 'n beer town, and Sister Eugene came to Saint Michael's High in the shadows and smoke of the mill to teach us the finer points of Keats and Shakespeare. She was up to the task and to us.

"Tough" wasn't the exact word to describe her. At times, it came close, but more to the point was "streetwise." When one of our Catholic hoods got into trouble with a seriously bad hombre from the "Flats" on South Side, Father Timothy could only offer to our apprentice sinner, "Pray, John, pray." Sister looked John right in his shifty eyes and said, "Where can you hide?" Hers was a realistic approach to John's existential dilemma, it seemed to me.

Being streetwise included the ability to tell if your students were slacking off. When I handed in a careless paper, the opening paragraph made her opaque projector to be displayed as an example of how not to begin an essay. This led to a class lesson on proofreading and how interesting and informative topic sentences should be written. Luckily, she had removed this hapless perpetrator's name from the top of the paper. At the time, I kind of slid way down in my desk, but somehow I sensed she liked me and appreciated my potential.

One of our next out-of-class writing assignments was to, as we now say, "write about our writing." I took the opportunity to explain how my teacher had influenced me to strive for excellence by likening her to another famous writer, e e cummings. What Edward Estlin and I had in common was our rather interesting use of punctuation conventions, syntax, and other elements that Strunk and White held dear. For the assignment, I was able to quickly parlay this weirdness into two handwritten sides and then probably went out to shoot hoops.

I made the opaque again. This time my name was at the top in full view. She read the whole essay to the class laughingly and lovingly and returned it to me to the applause of classmates.

When my mom died early in my senior year, she came to the viewing. When her mom passed away, I remember four or five of us guys jumping into Mike Milanik's dad's car and driving the dark mountain roads, which Father Tim might have described as "proof positive of the manifest presence of evil in the world," up to Johnstown on a school night in late winter to be there for her.

Sister Eugene taught us as juniors and seniors, and it was in her class that I began to want to excel. This was a new experience for me; I was thinking about going to college. It was usually given that a guy would get a job in the mill, drive a truck, or join the Army. After all, this was Pittsburgh. By the time senior year rolled around, I had become a solid A student in literature class. She taught literature with a passion that people around here normally reserved for sports, but she also respected and well-thought-out reading of Eliot or Shelly put forth in a discussion or writing. She trusted if you tried hard and hustled in her class. On one quiz, I wrote, "I read it but can't remember the title, honest!" That admission was worth a C. On my term paper, she questioned my change of tense. I told her I did it on purpose, and she said authors do that sometimes. She reconsidered my final grade. In grade school, I had been a poor reader of anything except comic books and hot rod magazines, but her respect for students' ideas helped me want to read and come up with ideas about literature.

In my senior year, she let me teach a few classes. She'd say something like, "Here, talk to the kids about these poems, I have to...? I don't remember what emergency prompted her to let me teach, but afterward she said that I should consider being a teacher.

In college, I continued to take my lumps trying to learn the craft of writing, but it was always her faith in me that kept me at it. After college, we corresponded a few times, and occasionally I went to visit her at Mount Alvernia, the Franciscan motherhouse. We lost touch after that, but in 1995, I was doing a workshop for the homeless at Saint Joseph's House of Hospitality under the auspices of the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project. I asked one of the nuns about my mentor and found out that Sister Eugene had died shortly before at Mount Alvernia. I was saddened, of course, but looking back, I knew that she would have been delighted to see what her teaching helped inspire.

My teaching career has been influenced by her example. When I went for an interview to become a writing project fellow, Susan Wall, the director, asked why I wanted to spend the summer at the University of Pittsburgh since I was already doing most of the things that the project encouraged. It was then I realized that like Kinnell's poem, "Saint Francis and the Sow," you must be told what you are/ can become. Sister did that to us through encouragement and by listening. That's why I was publishing my students' writing and listening to their "voices" even if some were a little unpunished. The writing project reinforced her message at a critical time in my teaching career. Sister Eugene was the first to stress to me that grammar made sense. It was an attempt at rationality. I now know that encouraging students to write and develop their voices creates a need to revisit language and metalanguage. Lastly, she taught me to look for the "diamond in the rough," as one college professor later referred to me. It takes patience and insight to recognize student writers whose progress may not be charted by what we see as a normal sequence of development.

I have learned this over 30+ years of teaching, but this understanding began to emerge even earlier when I was the student and Sister Eugene the teacher.

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Share the story of your literary life

The Voice invites you to submit your story to "Our Writing Lives." Your submission should reveal an event that affected your attitude toward language, reading, and writing. We're looking for straightforward, from-the-heart stories of 500 to 1500 words. Send your story to editors@writingproject.org or to Editors, National Writing Project, University of California, 2105 Bancroft Way #1042, Berkeley, CA 94720-1042.