In a shabby movie theatre the size of a modest living room, I sit with four strangers watching the remake of Terence Rattigan’s *The Browning Version*. It is about school and teachers and kids and the importance of being up to date. In the scene before us, Mr. Crocker-Harris, the Classics teacher, listens as his students, seated in rows, go about the business of construing Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*. Their boredom with Classics is palpable; so is their dislike of Mr. Crocker-Harris. He is rigid, demanding, aloof, and altogether unforgiving of these students for doing a shabby job. Impatient with their ineptness, Mr. Crocker-Harris takes over the translation. His voice loses its dry scratchiness, fills with passion and he stares unseeing over the heads of his students. “Imagine,” he says, “coming home from war to a wife who will soon become your murderer.” The room falls silent. The students raise their heads from contemplation of their desks and stare at Mr. Crocker-Harris. No more enthusiastic about construing Greek than they ever were, they know something is different; they know they are in the presence of something unusual; someday they will use the word “great.” They listen, enraptured, to Mr. Crocker-Harris’s ruminations on what he calls “perhaps the greatest play ever written.” They are alive with listening and watching. They are changed, and some of them know it. They know that they are not likely to share in such a life-quenching experience again once Mr. Crocker-Harris leaves the school. For Mr. Crocker-Harris is about to be fired. He is an anachronism. Neither he nor the subject he teaches is culturally relevant. They will be supplanted by Foreign Languages; the new department chair majored in Spanish.

On my way home, I think about the Crocker-Harrises in my own life, those teachers absorbed — sometimes obsessed — with their subject matter, those scholars unsuited for the well-rounded team spirit and cooperation to which modern schools aspire. I remember my eighth grade English teacher, Miss Nofzinger, old Step-and-a-half who wore a brace on one leg and a built-up shoe on the other, whose face got red and whose breath came faster whenever she spotted a misuse of the semicolon, her sentimental favorite, or the apostrophe, her crusade, either in our papers or, most satisfying to her, in a magazine or newspaper.

There weren’t many of these teachers, maybe three, but I remember each one, and I miss them, not out of sentiment for my lost youth, but because there aren’t very many of them left; they are a dying breed not likely to be protected as an endangered species necessary to produce the richest kind of learning.

So I’d like to make a plea for the teacher we all had, the square peg we never said hi to in the halls, who, even when we did (on a dare), didn’t hear us. I’m not talking about the teacher who comes to school in cut-offs and t-shirt and talks the whole period about Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac, inhaling through his teeth, the guy whose curriculum is himself. Nor am I talking about the teacher who walks back and forth in front of his sophomores and says, “Look at me and tell me if I had sex last night.” These teachers are jerks; in some cases they can be dangerous if students take them seriously. Most kids don’t, of course; they laugh them off and head for P.E. where the teacher knows what he’s doing.
Unlike the jerks, the teacher-scholar, our square peg, spends his or her life in the classroom experiencing again the excitement and wonder of his field and trying to transmit that experience to his students. His teaching holds no brook with social niceties in the faculty lounge, with contributions to the big picture of the school, with divergent learning styles stemming from socioeconomic annihilation of the nuclear family. He is the teacher who, to the dismay of many kids, never gives a free day, never gets off the topic, always starts class when the tardy bell rings, often locking the door as he does, and teaches right up until the final bell. He is the teacher who, if asked, would say, “What we are about in this class is the learning of literature (science, history, math). All else is extraneous.” He gives a test every Friday and hands it back every Monday. “Oh, no! you got him?!” the kids say. “He’s hard!”

A second difference between jerks and our teacher is that the jerks are not imperiled by recent advances in educational techniques. Our teacher is.

Good things are happening in education today. We can only hope the schoolhouse walls don’t collapse before these positive changes can take effect. Ironically, during these days when public criticism is at its loudest and when private citizens are paralyzed by their inability to change what they read in the papers, the theories and practices of teaching have changed for the better. These theories go by different names: interactive teaching, complex instruction, connective education. What they have in common is that they demand that teachers come out from behind the desk, the podium, the periodic table and get involved with the kids as facilitators of learning. What the new pedagogy says is that a steady diet of teacher-centered instruction doesn’t benefit many students, that a classroom where the kids face the teacher and the teacher-as-expert talks at the kids is not effective anymore if it ever was. Times have changed. And our teacher is in trouble.

Most likely, today he wouldn’t be hired. Today, principals want team players, collegial folks, teachers who will use their thirty-minute lunch hour to lean across the table and say, “Let’s think up a vision statement.” Some schools even assign teachers to teams and some even give teachers time to plan as teams. The team approach is terrific for a lot of kids and for their teachers, too. But it is a nightmare for the square peg.

Once, during a faculty meeting, I heard an administrator say to a teacher who sat apart reading a book, “Our school is only as strong as its weakest link.” The teacher continued his reading, imagining, no doubt, that the remark was directed at the miniskirt who taught a new required course in values called Warrior Pride. But everybody except him knew who the weakest link was and it wasn’t the miniskirt; she was team-oriented.

So today, unless the teacher-scholar knows enough to fake it in the interview, he or she won’t make it onto a faculty team in the first place. Only the square pegs who got hired before these new ideas made their way into teacher training programs, faculty inservices and professional growth conferences are left. They are eccentrics like Egon, the geometry teacher, who stands at the window in the faculty lounge and, for no discernible reason, says, “Every year when we get to this certain proof, I get shivers; I have to stand next to the heater.” In the silence that ensues, he says, “It’s so beautiful.” Egon does not cross the curriculum: “writing to know” is an alien concept. He gets to school at 6:30 a.m. and leaves shortly after the last bell. He refuses to attend faculty meetings or to chaperone Grad Night. Egon is thinking of retiring next year. He’ll get no argument from the principal.

They are teachers like Florence, whose classroom walls remain forever ignorant of student-produced mandalas, time lines and graffiti stems, who wouldn’t know a jigsaw from a Venn diagram, who know Shakespeare and care for little else. To Florence, small groups are what her students make when they perform the witches’ scene from Macbeth once a semester. Florence employs one teaching method: the Socratic dialogue which she is content to carry on, in written or verbal form, with any student who is up to it. She offers help to failing students after school by appointment and wonders why no one comes. Sometimes, when she loses herself and just about everybody else in her musings on Lear’s shame, the room grows quiet with an embarrassment tinged with wonder. Florence is 61 and tired. “She taught my mother!” say the kids.

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But what about the young Crocker-Harris or Egon or Florence? What happens to the English major who found herself after college in a world that cares nothing for books and so wants to become an English teacher? What becomes of the math major who loves pure thought and hopes to share his joy with kids? To the history major who fell in love with ideas somewhere during his junior year as he sat in a lecture hall listening to a great scholar and wants to become like him? Is there a place for a teacher who doesn’t know how to sit on a rug with her students and can’t, for the life of her, learn?

Most teachers will grow and flourish, nourished by the current notions of teaching. Most teachers will happily relinquish their position behind the podium where, if pressed, they will admit they were never happy in the first place. And the students of these teachers will thrive in an atmosphere of respect and shared responsibility. Student inquiry, manipulatives, collaboration, student-centeredness: they’re all good.

But sometimes I fear for a future where teachers are strategists and facilitators, where everybody’s in there mixing it up together, where you can’t tell the teacher from the students. I worry about a school where there isn’t a single odd-ball teacher on the whole faculty, where the kids say hi to all the teachers as they pass them in the hall and all the teachers say hi back.

So I plead for that one, the teacher who lives and breathes mathematics or history or literature, the weird one who, every so often, offers students a glimpse of greatness of intellect, of passion for pure thought, of fulfillment gained from the struggle toward truth of imagination and reason. I hope he is not an anachronism on his way out. I hope he is 24 years old and desirous of a teaching position. I hope he gets the job.

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