In 1960, Dr. James D Lynch, Professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley, exhorted those of us presumptuous enough to want to become English teachers to do the following: teach the best that has been thought and written to the greatest number of students. Over the next 32 years, my high school students and I rubbed up against the best that had been thought and written. It was not always a pleasant experience: this whole rubbing thing hurt if we kept at it too long, and sometimes we got rubbed raw enough to object loudly or, if that didn’t work, to withdraw into sullen silence. But with every poem and every story and every novel we read together, we changed. I like to think we got bigger and smarter. That’s what I like to think. But, as you will discover in the following excerpts from my journals, not everybody got smarter all the time including me. My journals I kept in the top right-hand drawer of my desk beneath Referral Forms, Library Passes, and Fire Drill Directions. Reading them every so often kept me grounded in the realities of the classroom which, though occasionally grim, I preferred to the realities of the faculty meeting or the lunchroom or the Language Arts Task Force or the Diversity Assembly or the Curriculum Committee or — grimmest of all — the Open Forum on the Tardy Policy (“We want your input”). The titles I have written as afterthoughts.

“All We Know of Heaven and All We Need of Hell” — Emily Dickinson

January, period 4: I have done the impossible. I have broken the spirit of up to 30 ninth graders, and together we have “done” Romeo and Juliet. I am exhausted, so are they. What is important here is that we stuck with it, and everybody had his say — not about racism or grades or Mr. Shepherd (the v.p.) or Now, but about what this line means, about what’s going on here, about why someone does something and — this is the best — about the lines and passages they liked. We put our faces into the book and looked for a long time every day. Oh, sure I probably killed R & J again, and next year they’ll probably moan and groan when their teacher announces Shakespeare and they’ll say, “Not him again!” But I don’t care. Maybe I’m getting a bit Bloomish; maybe I’m after some cultural literacy. Mostly, I’m after Focusing on Print. Dr. Bloom, baby, we’re starting at the bottom in here. Actually, I’m proud of them. My kids who used to be fiends from hell are turning out to be angels from heaven.

“Books are a load of crap” — Philip Larkin

Reading day, period 4: Sharon is reading Silas Marner because her mom gave it to her for Christmas, and she doesn’t have anything to read. On the other side of the

*Arthur Hugh Clough, 1819-1861
room, Nakia sleeps behind Cheerleaders. Corinna reads a Harlequin romance; Kim, You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again. Mark sleeps. leBrun “reads” Satan; Meshelle writes notes behind Sybll. Penny reads Danielle Steele in hard cover. Stacy forgot her book. Is this day worth anything?

"By nature, analysis is plodding at best." — John Ciardi

February, period 3: I'm mad, no, disappointed. "Oil Spill" (a poem) became another throwaway, something that has been a characteristic of my teaching career for 28 years. One change in the last five years, so I thought, is that I'm less inclined to throwaways. I have become more tenacious, more demanding of my students and myself. So now, here I go again, letting oil spill to no purpose. I dunno, that Canadian writer, Susan somebody or other, says, "Read 'em a poem." She wants us to let up on analysis. "Teachers have ruined more writers than alcohol," she says. Way back I remember Pauline Kael telling an audience of English teachers, "You ruined literature; leave the movies alone." Still, "experiencing" language is like water on a duck's back. It's like watching TV since "experiencing" for all of us must be quick, immediate, and short-lived. So one reads or hears a poem — O.K., that's it, next? No, there has to be a middle ground, a place between the ocean and the boardwalk. O.K., finally a metaphor. It's the beach where we can wallow comfortably, where we can stretch out for a long time, where we can picnic, where we can play, where we can let our friends bury us — once in a while. That's what I want poems and stories and books to be for us — not a wave that splashes over us and is gone, yet not the hardness, the unyieldingness, the stiffness of the sidewalk. I want us to go to the beach and wiggle our toes in the sand.

"Sometimes a Great Notion" — Ken Kesey

Period 5: Kids read aloud from Midsummer Night's Dream. Everyone (!) intent on following the text. "I love Puck," whispers Ken to no one at all. "I want to be him."

"It (literature) is a means of allowing us, through the imagination, to live more fully, more deeply, more richly, and with greater awareness."
— Laurence Perrine. "And vice versa." — me

March, period 3: We are writing for five minutes before we talk about Autumn's opinion that it's so yucky when a person gets beaten to death, like Mr. Freeman in Caged Bird, instead of shot. Shahrad reads what he has written. Well, Shahrad used to have a gun, but he sold it. We are fascinated: "How much did it cost?" "Did you ever fire it?" "What kind?" "Did you sell it to a teenager?" "Why did you buy it?" "Why did you sell it?" Shahrad is composed as he answers: "I sold it; I wanted something bigger." His eyes are clear, gray-blue. He doesn't blink very often; his gaze is level, untroubled, cool. Shahrad is cool. He is what we've seen on TV. Shahrad is Living Color.

"They (Plato and Aristotle) were absolutely one soul as they looked at the problem. This, according to Plato, is the only real friendship, the only real com-
mon good. It is here that the contact people so desperately seek is to be found.” —Allen Bloom

February, period 5: Metamorphosis (Kafka’s): “Gregor’s father is like us,” says Sarah. “We make the homeless into drunks and bums because they make us feel guilty. Like we push the handicapped out of sight.” “Yeah, like we say people on welfare are lazy,” Jacob says. “It’s like we do it to the blacks. Keep ’em in the ghetto cuz they shame us and then say well they don’t deserve anything more, look how they act.” I ask, “If the father is like us, who is Grete?” (Gregor’s sister who replaces Gregor in the parents’ hopes and dreams). A stunned silence of recognition. “Us,” whispers Mike.

After too many years I had to acknowledge that “Why do we have to read this?” is the biggest question of them all and the only one that matters.

The relevance of The Metamorphosis is overwhelming except to Jennifer. Jennifer’s head lies on the desk, a sign of what she thinks about having been assigned to read yet another piece of literature written by a dead white guy and a European at that. In fact, of course, she has not read it, and by the time the kids make the connection between Kafka and the treatment of our black citizens, Jennifer is asleep.

Oh, boy, it’s tough, this literature-based curriculum, especially for lifelong readers like teachers. I was always a reader, but then, as my kids sometimes said, “When you were our age, there wasn’t anything else to do.” That’s true. Though if there had been, I would, I believe, still have found the comfort of solitude between the pages of a book. In its privacy, I was inviolate.

In college, reading went public: I was expected to write papers about books for professors who told me from their podiums on the stages of lecture halls what those books meant. They told me, and I believed them, that the books we were supposed to read dealt with the big questions of the human condition. And they did. In my blue books, I told them what they said and I got rewarded. In four short years, I went from hermit to philosopher.

In graduate school, reading went Public. Reading became material to be defended, prosecuted, executed, and, sometimes, set free. In the courtroom of the graduate seminar, I argued the great questions of the human condition, ignoring what I truly believed, caring only that I won.

In the high school classroom, the game was up. The big questions disappeared: no one cared if Fate dictated our lives. No one gave a damn about the individual’s role in society. No one even wanted to imagine that technology was bad for the human spirit. Big deal. What time do we get out of here?

All those big public questions that I had so loved to wrestle with, that had given me such pleasure, even an identity, disappeared. And in their place came, from the mouths of babes, over and over, the question: Why do we have to read this?

In the early years of my career, I would answer, “Because I say so,” and “someday when you finish all the years of college I have, you can be the teacher, but until then ....” But the question persisted and got louder and louder until finally I had to listen. After too many years I had to acknowledge that “Why do we have to read this?” is the biggest question of them all and the only one that matters.

Literature in the classroom is so uncerebral, so utterly human: it depresses, it elevates, it frightens, it bores, it demands and liberates, it resounds with joy and despair. It’s full of surprises, and so are the kids. It is rich with everything human and so are the kids. What better match?

So, yoo-hoo out there with your heads on your desks, your eyes out the windows, your backpacks ready for tripping, we read because the best that has been thought and written is about you. It is its own reason for being and so are you. It needs no apology and neither do you. Are you up to it? Yeah, but not everyday? And not just because the teacher says so. OK, it’s a start.

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