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Behind the Facebook Façade: Honoring Our Students' Hidden Lives

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Behind the Facebook Façade: Honoring Our Students' Hidden Lives

The young woman's pregnant belly swelled and swelled, filling the small seminar room in the library, and pushing my students and me closer and closer to the walls as the semester and her pregnancy wore on. The creative writing class was half men, half women, all of them traditional-aged students, none of them parents—at least so far as I knew—and many of them oddly ignorant about pregnancy and childbirth, and reluctant even to say the words. At the small liberal arts college in Minnesota where I taught for many years, pregnancy is something of a rarity even among the faculty and staff; among the two thousand women students, two or three a year bring the burden of an unborn child into the classroom where they can't help but feel glaringly conspicuous. But Kristin came back to school from a semester abroad, pregnant, but determined to finish her senior year *and* to have her baby. She came to love the baby, who appeared in her poems and stories as a little seahorse fluttering inside her, as she wrote about the hard decisions and challenges she faced.

Neither my students nor I could ignore Kristin or her burgeoning stomach or the mix of joy and trouble she brought into our classroom. We read and talked about her poems and said the words out loud to each other—*morning sickness, pregnant, baby, adoption*. By the last day of class, we were saying *labor* and *contraction* and wondering if we'd know what to do if the little seahorse decided to swim out into the big ocean of the world a month early.¹

Ten years later, we couldn't ignore Hawo, who came to class every day wearing a long, colorful skirt and a hijab that completely covered her hair, but swept back over her ears to reveal pretty earrings. At first, she planted herself in a far back corner of the room and said in a voice so soft we could hardly hear her that she and the surviving members of her

family had come to central Minnesota to escape Somalia's civil war. As we read poems and stories that reminded Hawo of events in her life, she, like Kristin, seemed to grow. In poems and sometimes heated discussion, she found the words to tell us about her life, always on the run, from Somalia to Ethiopia to Kenya and finally to Minnesota. She was a little girl when the masked soldiers wielding machine guns came to their home, wounding her brother and sending the family on a terrified flight. Here are a few lines from her "Childhood Memory Poem":

I remember my mother
As she wandered around the house
You remember that?
I remember shooting.
Mother screamed.
"Don't kill my son, don't kill him"
Seeing the blood pour from my brother. . . .
You remember that?
I remember the killer living
And smiling.
I remember one naked face.

Hawo was only ten when her mother died giving birth to her eleventh child, drenched in blood, in the back seat of a car, trying to get to a distant doctor. The baby died soon after. Hawo became the caretaker for her younger brothers and sisters, especially the one-year-old. She carried him on her back to get water—an hour's walk each way every morning. She told us these stories without self-pity or self-righteousness, but with a quiet matter-of-factness that wouldn't let us look away. The burden of memory she carried, like Kristin's growing baby, filled the classroom.

Why do I tell you these two unusual stories in an essay about teaching and diversity? Because Kristin and Hawo made visible for me what forty years of teaching have led me to believe about almost all of my students. It's important to say here that they are mostly middle-class, Caucasian, from proud supportive families, many from big, Catholic, Minnesota families; they are good-looking and well-dressed and appear self-assured, smart, and ambitious. Except for a few over the years, my students are not like Hawo

or like those Jonathan Kozol and Greg Boyle write about—kids who grew up on the streets of the South Bronx or East LA, living in shelters or cars, joining gangs for protection and a sense of belonging, often hungry, always in danger from careless bullets meant for someone else. You'd never know from looking at my students or hearing their everyday conversation that many of them carry into class heavy burdens of unspoken pain and harsh memories that even their best friends don't know about. Whether I want to know it or not, in their writing, discussion, and sometimes in quiet conversations away from the eyes and ears of their peers, many of them show me what's deep under the apparently privileged, untroubled surface of their lives. Even the blandest, most impersonal writing assignment regularly calls to the surface oblique or blunt stories of rape, incest, addiction, and abuse. Without even trying, I could fill a book with examples, as I believe any teacher could who has listened to what the students say and what they don't say about what one young woman calls "the foreign country of grief" where many of them have lived for at least part of their lives.

Almost every year, a young woman finds the courage and the words to write about a rape that happened in seventh grade, or on her first date, or when she said *No* to Joe, a boy with nice brown eyes, or when her father or grandfather came to her room at night. They write about how that secret, corrosive knowledge eats away their happy selves and becomes the bitter ground where thoughts of suicide grow. Almost every year, a young man or woman, unable to carry the lonely secret any longer, finds the courage and the voice to write, "I'm gay," "I'm lesbian, and my parents don't want me to be around my little sisters, my little brothers; my friends don't want to room with me." They write those words longing for steady, compassionate eyes that don't slide away. Almost every year young women, carrying the burden of their bodies, each part judged and found wanting, write about starving or stuffing themselves; young men, convinced that they're weird and that no one will ever understand them, let alone love them, write about the razor scars on their arms and legs, about being bullied, called "Igor" and "Watermelon Head."

Too many of my students want to fly away from the world they see lurking just ahead of them. If I can believe what they write, students come carrying the burden of their minds, home to spacious, fantastic worlds; they are appalled by the world they live in, its suburban sameness, and the life that stretches before them; or, rather, doesn't stretch, but hunches in a cubicle, a computer screen their only company and their window on the world. These students read and write about fantastic worlds, the only places where they and their dreams are at home. After reading James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" or Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, stories about worlds apparently as distant as the stars from their sheltered lives, one student after another writes or talks about drug-addicted brothers; alcoholic mothers and fathers; autistic, violent, depressed siblings; and parents—both mothers and fathers—who walked out on them when they were young to pursue a new life with a new partner and, they fear, new, better kids.

I've read numerous profiles of this generation of students that are supposed to help teachers and parents reach across the abyss separating their lives from ours. They are plugged in, we're told, more at home in virtual than in real relationships, certain that they're special and entitled to special treatment (top grades, at the very least); they're protected by helicopter parents hovering just overhead, and, most recently, by Black Hawk parents, armed and ready to do battle to rescue their precious young. They belong to the "porcelain generation," slick, shiny, and impervious to the joys and sorrows of others as well as to their own deep thoughts, convictions, or feelings. In a recent *New York Times* article titled "Looking for Intimacy in the Age of Facebook," Andrew Reiner tells the familiar story of his Honors students at Towson University who spend hours a day texting and on Facebook, photoshopping and editing their profiles in a "quest for social perfection" that looks exactly like everyone else's social perfection. While appearing to reveal their every thought, every action, every exaggerated emotion, they reveal nothing of real consequence to them. As Reiner writes, "God help the poor soul who bleeds pedestrian, vulnerable feelings like sadness or melancholy onto her or someone else's wall. As a student recently observed to a sea of nodding heads, 'That kind of panhandling for attention is just pathetic. It has no place on Facebook.'"² I certainly encounter in my students the attitudes and qualities Reiner and

many others have described, but that profile doesn't adequately describe a single student I've taught over many years. Each one is more than that, other than that. Belonging is important, so a part of them wants to slide neatly into the prevailing mold. But as it does in most human beings, something alive in them rises up in protest against such brutal homogenization.

I've done my share of griping about young people in general and about our students in particular. Many of them practice a kind of self-display that distorts and flattens every emotion, even as it exaggerates them. At our college, as at most colleges and high schools, students visit and post on a Facebook page called *Confessions*. They're not asking for forgiveness. They're often bragging, anonymously, about sexual exploits and sometimes spouting appalling misogyny, racism, and homophobia. After almost forty years of college teaching, I'm not naïve about our students and their behavior. I'm often appalled by their binge drinking and drug tripping, by the way they turn the streets of our town into slums every weekend, by their disrespect for property (ask the landlords!) and often for each other. I live down the road from a cluster of student houses with names like "The Brothel," "The Bullpen," and "The Projects." On weekend mornings the lawns are littered with beer cans, broken whisky bottles, and trash; it doesn't take much of an imagination to picture what goes on in those houses or at the month-long string of senior parties with themes like "Bro's and Ho's" and "Pedophiles and Pigtails." And in one eleven a.m. class taught by a prof who is brilliant, creative, and challenging, a clutch of students brought a concoction of "gin and juice" in their water bottles and slugged it down as they discussed religion in America.

I also know more than enough about the so-called "hook-up culture"—the ocean of booze and sex in which many students must learn to swim. While some of them defend their sexual practices and their drinking habits and ask concerned adults to butt out and quit their sanctimonious hand-wringing, other's say—or, more likely, write—the opposite: that they are trying desperately to hold on to the values their families have taught them; or that they fell into the drinking and sex culture early in their college life or even before as the only route to acceptance and popularity. After a couple of years, they wake up to the sickening certainty that they

have betrayed their truest selves one more time. Writing can be a way for them to remind themselves in black and white of who they were, have become, want to be. And I've discovered that even the bro's-and-ho's and the gin-and-juice gang have another side.

We might think that only students like Hawo are immigrants to this academic culture, and that they're the only ones who balance precariously between the world of their parents and family and the new, bright world college promises them. Certainly, those students reject or lose parts of their culture and their ease in their mother tongue, if they do as their parents and our culture urge them to do, becoming exemplary students and speakers of English. An eloquent spokesperson for every group of immigrants to this country has documented the gains and losses and the inevitable divisions between a Hmong or Mexican or Chinese or Somali family and a son or daughter with a U.S. college degree. (I think of Richard Rodriguez, Sandra Cisneros, Li-Young Lee, Kao Kalia Yang, Yasmeen Mahamoud.) But I've also taught students I'd call immigrants from working class families to our liberal arts college, with its high price tag and middle- to upper-class assumptions. They, too, often leave their families behind, hiding their struggles behind the appearance of prosperity. It seems to me that most of these students would admit almost any family secret except their poverty. Maybe she lives with her single mom in a trailer court; maybe his parents both work two jobs—when they're lucky enough to have jobs—just to pay the rent and keep food on the table. These parents can't afford to pay a penny toward tuition, much less pick up the tab for thirsty Thursdays at the local bar, where some sons and daughters generously buy rounds with their parents' credit cards. On graduation day, at a reception after the ceremony, I often meet my students' parents for the first time. We have our share of professional people, but every year I meet parents with big, calloused farmers' hands and humble, proud eyes, awed by their son's or daughter's accomplishments. These parents do not hover, do not rush into battle. They didn't go to college and have to trust their sons and daughters to navigate on their own.

Our students who pursue advanced degrees sometimes find that their economic disadvantages suddenly become advantages, as medical

school interviewers or grad school admissions committees look for ways to distinguish among many hard-working undergrads with sterling transcripts. I don't know what's in the mind of the admission people—maybe that these kids deserve a break, or maybe that their difficult family circumstances have taught them to overcome obstacles and gain self-reliance and toughness from the struggle. To a person, the students I've talked to about this bias think that their background is giving them an unfair advantage over fellow students who worked just as hard as they did to master Organic Chemistry or to write an Honors thesis. But because they want so desperately to become doctors or lawyers or professors, and know that, once again, their parents can't help them, they reveal in their letters of application the family economics they had kept hidden for four years. These immigrants, whether ethnic or economic, often bring with them into our classrooms the lonely burden of a self divided between here and there, between appearances and secret reality. The working-class writer Tillie Olsen uses the potent phrase “the hidden injuries of class”³ to describe the circumstances that inhibit or even prevent the creation of literature by people of the working class; she names anxiety and shame about their jobs and family background and a deep lack of confidence that they have anything to say or the language in which to say it. I believe that some of our students also suffer these hidden injuries and would welcome the chance to move toward healing.

Of course, it isn't just our students who walk into our sunlit classrooms everyday bent under a backpack full of trouble. Again, I could fill a book with stories from my long life as a teacher, and, again, I don't think I am at all extraordinary in this. In the last ten years, five beloved members of my family, three of them babies, have died from sickness or in accidents; two of my sisters have gone blind, and I'm going there, too, gradually losing peripheral vision. Several of my teaching friends have died of cancer or taught wearing bright scarves or jaunty hats in place of hair. I had cancer, too, and after being out of class for a couple of weeks to recover from surgery, I returned, sandwiching daily trips to the hospital for radiation between classes and grading. On each of these occasions of death or sickness, I remember walking into my classes, stricken by the latest bad news, and torn between the need to grieve and my responsibility to my students. Was it fair to them to tell them about this new burden, and if I

did, what good or bad lessons would the revelation teach them? I'll return to this question, but first I must face one more kind of trouble that invades even a school like mine, in central Minnesota, surrounded by corn and alfalfa fields and beautiful lakes and woods.

I usually detect a faint sneer when people describe college as an ivory tower, and my students hint at an over-protected innocence when they talk with trepidation of entering "the real world" after graduation. This *is* the real world, and whether or not we and our students are attentive to the troubles rising up all around us, they seep into our classrooms, written on the faces and psyches of our students. Most obviously, students like Hawo are refugees from past and present wars. Every Hmong student who walks into my class brings with him or her the whole story of the Vietnam War and its tragic consequences for a people who now have no homeland but this one. But Aaron, too, brings that story with him, from northern Minnesota, where his father, a Vietnam vet with PTSD, drank his way through Aaron's childhood. Ask any teacher where she was when the planes hit the trade towers on September 11. She was most likely in class or about to go to class. That's where I was, as I was when President Kennedy and Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy and Malcolm X were killed, and during a lifetime of wars, cold and hot. The beauty of our campuses and the bounty of the surrounding farms doesn't blind our alert students to perhaps irreversible environmental disasters. And while they're not always the best stewards of natural resources, many of them come to our schools because the outdoors is their natural habitat, and they want to savor and steward it.

The tragic and frightening events of my life and of our world's life sometimes led me to an intensity that bludgeoned my students into cowed silence, resistance, and flight. When my brother was fighting brain cancer, I was lucky enough to spend time with him, laughing, talking, and crying, with no pretensions or evasions, rejoicing in every word, every mouthful of food, every heart-lifting breath of air. When I came from his hospital bed to my classroom, I said in words and tone, "Stop taking life, *your* lives, for granted! People are dying, for God's sake! You might die!" My students' conversations and concerns seemed unbearably trivial and vulgar. I was

so strident that a young writer I'd been working with for two years chose another teacher to advise his senior thesis, a collection of poems, telling me bluntly that he couldn't work with me because I unbalanced him. But why would I imagine that my students are deaf to the voices I hear, or ones from their culture saying similar things in a language I don't understand? Why would I imagine that none of them came to our class from the bedside of a dying brother, mother, or friend—as they often have?

If I need evidence that my students are as troubled as I am by the events of our world, near and far, all I have to do is turn again to their writing, which records their resistance to injustice and environmental devastation. I could give dozens of examples from essays exemplifying an admirable combination of wide-ranging, meticulous research and the students' personal stake in the matter. Here is just one of them. Alex, a big-city boy, wrote about North Dakota's oil boom. His parents and grandparents grew up in western North Dakota, and he remembers endless nighttime car trips across the prairie and visits with relatives that taught him to love the "vast, almost barren landscape" and the hard-working, community-minded people. Alex describes the environmental hazards of fracking and the social hazards of the oil boom that has lured to North Dakota thousands of people who don't care at all about the land or its future. They want to get in, get rich, and get out, leaving behind small towns, farm land, and social structures damaged beyond repair. Alex's essay ends with this elegy to a beloved place and way of life:

When I visit my relatives now, the drive looks incredibly different than it did a few years ago. A steady stream of semis shares the solitude I cherished on the interstate as a child. As we near Belfield, flames from the wells blaze along the horizon and pollute the blackness. The flames tempt the men like the neon glow of a strip club. . . . The harsh lights violate the tranquility of my youth. I leave North Dakota now with a sense of loss. When this modern day gold rush ends, will my children be able to experience North Dakota as I experienced it as a child? What will North Dakota look like when the black river beneath it dries?

I hasten to say that I never fish for personal revelations from my students. My assignments, as I said, are often bland and noncommittal: Write

an essay, write a story, write a poem, write your own version of Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," to get a physical feel for how rhythm creates meaning. I try to ask questions that are curious, genuine, and innocent.

For instance, I asked a large class of first- and second-year students from a wide variety of majors to create an anthology of ten to fifteen poems that attracted them for one reason or another, with or without a unifying theme. They could be old favorites, poems they found on the Internet or in anthologies, or ones they or their friends wrote. For each one they were to write a good-sized paragraph of response, keeping their eyes firmly fixed on the poems. But in explaining why they loved (their word) one or another selection, the poems got tangled up in their lives or maybe vice versa. Even the students who were most carefully guarded in class wrote responses like these: "This poem helped me when my dad died." "This one, written by my friend, helped me believe again that I'm worthwhile, even though my dad molested me." "These ten war poems are an accurate picture of our past and present world."

I try not to look away from these shy revelations, hidden somewhere in the middle of the anthology. I also try not to let my class become therapy; my students and I know that I can't heal or take away these sorrows. A young woman whose father, a prominent psychologist, abused her emotionally and sexually for years, finally found metaphors harsh enough to express what had happened to her. When she and I talked about her poems, she said that she wakes up every day wishing that her early life had been different, had been normal. I wish that, too, as I do for many of my students. We both know that's a futile wish. Her life is her life. But perhaps writing about it, no matter how veiled the language, will help her take on the essential human task of spinning out from the spiral of self-absorption we are only too ready to attribute to young people.

I think we can help our students break out of that stifling spiral, even when it protects against pain, if we raise rather than lower our expectations—or more accurately, shift them. A man she barely knew raped one of my students when she was a high school junior. Like so many young women, she didn't tell a soul; she came to college carrying that secret

and edging closer and closer to suicide. An alert, compassionate teacher walked her to the counseling office, and by the time she arrived in my writing class, she was ready to put her experience on paper. When a student puts something so raw into my hands, it's tempting to say that I can't possibly grade it or ask her to revise something that took more courage to write than I'll ever have. But that reaction stops evolution in its tracks; it assumes that our students really are made of porcelain and will break at the slightest nudge.

You might think that all of this attention to the burdens our students carry is just more of the same hyper-vigilant hovering that puts them and their personal woes at the center of the universe. But I think that the opposite is true. The questions my students and I ask each other about every piece of writing, even the most personal, are "So what?" and "Who cares?" and "Why are you telling us this?" and "What's at stake for you and your readers?" "Because it's about me" is never an acceptable answer, either for me or for their honest fellow writers. We can and must help students write their way to an answer that reaches out beyond the self to readers and to the needy world.

The student I mentioned earlier wrote a first draft about her struggle to forgive her rapist so that hatred would no longer be the center of her life. As she pondered those essential writer's questions, she knew that she was writing to and for herself, but also to and for the many girls and women who were at that moment struggling to forgive a rapist, the parents who couldn't protect them, and the men who were all somehow responsible; most important, she wanted these other girls and women to know that they didn't need to forgive themselves because they hadn't done anything wrong. Her completed essay was blunt and starkly honest, in tracing both her pain and hatred and her hard-won and still tentative forgiveness. She sent her essay to the battered women's shelter in a nearby city, asking them to give it to women who were struggling as she had.

We teachers, too, must allow our students to rescue us from our own brand of self-absorption and lead us to what journalist David Brooks calls an "epistemology of modesty."⁴ As he says, the world is too wild, varied,

and complex for any person or even all of us together to fully understand it; and what's true of the world is also true of each person. This wild complexity should lead us to an attitude of wonder and a hunger to learn throughout our lives. Lucille Clifton said the same thing in an interview with Bill Moyers: "We know very little. Poems are about questions. They aren't about answers."⁵ And because teaching is, in a way, a very long poem, it must be rich with questions, real ones, not fishy ones with a hook in them to catch and reel in dutiful or unwary students. The questions I mean are ours and those of our students, as well as those of imaginative people who remind us that we humans know about a tenth of what's out there to learn in every field of human knowledge.

But questions, even radical ones, aren't the same as cynicism, a bitter pleasure that projects an aura of sophistication and worldly wisdom and can lead us to a blasé dismissal of our students' discoveries and insights. As one of my students wrote, "Growing up, skepticism was always something of a duty, but it was almost exclusively purposed towards despair. With indiscipline it certainly assumes the character of a disease." If we teachers suffer from that disease, we might dismiss, for instance, the sickening way the earth falls out from under young people when they begin to doubt a deeply-held religious belief, one that might bind them to a dozen generations of their family. In a course called "The Past, Present, and Future of the Book," I gave another of my seemingly harmless assignments: *Create a piece of writing, either print or electronic, that is a hybrid and that somehow or other uses physical qualities to either reinforce or challenge what the words say.* Twenty students created twenty memorable projects, but the one I'll never forget is Zach's "Body Book." He wrote it with a Sharpie, literally, on his body. As he said in his introduction, his book is an act of resistance and subversion: "With all this technology in the world invading every sphere, nothing is private, and anything captured electronically is [in the] public domain. Therefore, I chose for my canvas that which I believe remains as one of the last private spaces: the body." When he presented his project to the class, he revealed one body part after another—a G-rated strip tease. His insecurities about his body—which many young men feel as acutely as women do—snaked around his arms and legs and chest. On his back was the realization that he no longer believed in God:

I've heard I was created in God's image. I'd like some proof—a photograph or DNA test.

They say God exists, but when others prove them wrong, they hem and haw and finagle a way for religion to be the answer.

I've told enough lies in my day that I can spot one when I hear it. So now what? With no afterlife, all I have is this one, in this body.

Tough luck.

It sucks to realize that no matter how many vitamins I take, I can't stave off death.

And the worst part is, when it's all over, I don't get to turn to the Christians, Muslims, or Scientologists and say:

I

told

you

so.

Just.... Nothing.

I can imagine cynical or patronizing or bored responses to Zach's discoveries: "He finally wised up." Or "Every college kid becomes an agnostic or an atheist sooner or later; that's what college is for." But those responses ignore the sense of loss in Zach's "Body Book." He described for himself and, I'm sure, for many others in the class who were teetering on the same crumbling ledge, what it feels like when the faith in God that has sustained them for twenty years gives way.

Another related form of cynicism I've heard from some of my colleagues is the certainty that eighteen-year-olds can't teach us anything, especially about our discipline. That bit of arrogance reminds me of the discovery that turned Tillie Olsen into a great writer. She was a teenager devouring the British and U.S. white, male writers who filled the shelves of the Omaha public library in the 1930s. She had made her way to the M's when the Great Depression hit and she had to quit school and go to work to help support her family. But that was far enough to teach her an unforgettable lesson: "I had something to contribute. I had something which wasn't in there yet."⁶ What she had to tell were the stories of hard-working immigrant men and women and their children—the people who became the characters in her wonderful stories collected in *Tell Me a Riddle*. I don't know what unspoken knowledge my students bring with them, but

I'm certain that some of what they know hasn't made its way into the poems, stories, blogs, and essays I read and teach. I don't want to retreat into the safety of the world I know, and ignore the terrors and—admit it—the beauty and wisdom of my students' worlds.

If I'm awake and listening hard, I'll hear what a student like Clarence has to teach me. He was one of a small group of African-American students at our school, a kid from New Jersey who loves science, literary theory, and writing. He came to our college with high hopes for a career in medicine or medical research. For three years, he was almost stone silent in his classes and unable to articulate the ideas pounding away inside his head. Besides biology and chemistry, Clarence took literature and writing classes so he could learn to read, think, write, and speak clearly and critically. As a lone black voice in many of his classes, Clarence was usually silent, unable to counter the unintentional racism he heard from his peers and, sometimes, from his teachers. For instance, in a class on race and ethnicity in American literature, a student parroted the threadbare view that President Obama isn't black enough because he uses correct English, dresses well, and reveals his knowledge of law and history. In his mind, Clarence decisively deconstructed that racist idea, but he couldn't shape his outrage into coherent words. So, he sat in conspicuous silence, hating himself for his complicity.

Clarence was able to say in quiet conversations some of the things he couldn't say in the heat of classroom discussions; and after a few conversations with him, I began to see parts of the world through his eyes and then, reluctantly, see some of my own prejudices. After hearing Clarence's objection to movies like *Freedom Writers*, about white people who save black kids, I went to see *The Blind Side*. I watched it as if Clarence were sitting beside me. What would he see? What would he hear? One more in a long string of movies telling the same tired story about a big, almost mute, uneducated black man, homeless, with a heroin-addicted mother living in a Memphis ghetto called Hurt Village, and with friends who are going nowhere but to prison or the grave. He's saved by a wealthy, flighty white woman with a pile of mixed motives, lots of courage, and a good heart, and her kind, brave family. He goes to college on a football

scholarship and graduates on the Dean's list with the help of another white woman—a tough tutor named Miss Sue. The movie-makers hasten to assure us that this is based on a true story, as it is. But as I watched, I could hear Clarence asking, “Why keep telling that same story?” What stories do we know, does he know, that aren't in there yet?

Clarence finally found his voice in an explosive, satirical essay in praise of whiteness that he wrote and published in the student newspaper. He titled his article “A Public Service Announcement Sponsored by Whiteface Minstrel Shows” and ended it with this footnote: “If you found yourself agreeing with me at any point in this Public Service Announcement, please know that equality will remain an abstract idea instead of an everyday practice in American life, and that your agreement fertilizes the roots of racism and prejudice in America.” When Clarence found his voice, he taught us all. I know he taught me.

Now I'm at the end of this essay, the place where I need to ask, “So what?” “Who cares?” “Why am I telling you these stories?” “What's at stake for me and you?” In “Dedications,” the last section of Adrienne Rich's long poem, “An Atlas of the Difficult World,” Rich gives a catalogue of the people she “knows are reading this poem.” Among them are “the young who are counted out, who count themselves out.”⁷ What might be at stake are the inner selves of the young people we teach. There are many kinds of exile, and all of us, teachers and students alike, have parts of ourselves that are wandering in the wilderness, looking for a home and a language. For our students this kind of exile might have nothing to do with ethnicity or class and everything to do with that generational profiling I described above. It might not be the result of hard times they or their families have suffered but rather of unspoken and often unspeakable joys, loves, hopes.

I think of Connor, a big, tough starting tackle on our college's champion football team. He wrote a poem about himself as a football player and a poet, the two selves that, he says, are never together in the same room:

I can tackle full-grown men twice my size—only to get tackled by full grown matters of unspeakable consequence

my wall boasts quotes from Ali, Gretzky, Lombardi—
while shunning my favorites from Dickinson, Cummings, Baudelaire

I wear anklets with my under armour,
mouth guards with my ponytail
I keep my jock strap with my diary,
my musings with my protein shakes

I'm a dumb jock
I'm an honors student
I'm a meat head
whose head is in the clouds

But in his poem, the poet and the athlete are together, the split mended. In their poems, stories, essays, and memoirs, students reveal many other hidden selves that are incomparably richer and more varied than the X's and Y's older generations often reduce them to—the self who values justice and the common good over personal gain (“I have no other desire in this world,” Alex writes, “than to live side by side with the poor and destitute.”); the self who loves books—the feel and smell of them, the notes other readers leave in the margins—and the libraries they inhabit; the self who loves the religious rituals that plunge her into mystery and communion; the self who would gladly trade the glitter and excitement of her Los Angeles home for the kindergarten classroom in a school in Puerto Rico where she volunteered; even, wonder of wonders in this hyper-connected world, the self who longs for unplugged stretches of silence and solitude.

Writing is only one route to wholeness for this generation of young people. It is the one I was lucky enough to help them follow, teaching them to write about whatever was on their minds with skill, power, and authority, so that their writing became the beginning of liberation for themselves and a gift to others.

Notes

1. This and all other quotations from my students' writing are unpublished. I have their permission to use their words and ideas. In some cases, I have used first names; in other cases, at their request, I have omitted names and simply cited a student or a young man or woman.
2. Andrew Reiner. "Looking for Intimacy in the Age of Facebook." (*The New York Times*, 1 Nov. 2013.) <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/03/education/edlife/looking-for-intimacy-in-the-age-of-facebook.html>.
3. Tillie Olsen. *Silences*. (New York: The Feminist Press, 2003), p. 263.
4. David Brooks. "The Modesty Manifesto." Aspen Ideas Festival, 2011. http://www.aspenideas.org/session/modesty_manifesto.
5. Lucille Clifton. Interview by Bill Moyers. *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets, Part 8*. (David Grubin Productions and Public Affairs Television, Inc. New York: Newbridge Communications, 1995. VHS.)
6. Tillie Olsen, Qtd. In Kenneth Turan. "Breaking Silence." *New West*, Volume 28, August 1978, p. 56.
7. Adrienne Rich. "Dedications." *An Atlas of the Difficult World*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), p. 26.

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