

The Constant Gardner

By Teri Pastore

“Each fall, the doors of Oregon public schools swing open and students fill classrooms with not only potential, but challenge. Chief among the challenges, and there are many, is resistance to learning. Inevitably, educators encounter one student whose sole *raison d'être* is to be resistant; picture the glaring student in the back of the classroom with the bad posture. Typically, however, the single emotion driving their resistance is fear.

A Buddhist saying, “The deeper the mud, the more beautiful the lotus” describes the unrecognized work of educators to transform resistance and fear into acceptance and on a good day, into exuberance. Teaching is as much about sharing knowledge as it is about shepherding students beyond the comfort zone of their own limitations.

At Mt. Hood Community College for example, in a writing class several years back, we were covering the descriptive essay. A young female student sat in the back of the class, and well, glared at me and slumped in her chair. While most other students were taking notes, or gazing my way with some level of attention, she glared, or alternately looked as though she was redefining the boundaries of boredom to galactic proportions. So I did what I always do when students look bored in my classroom; I tried to engage her. I returned her gaze, I called on her; I did my best to chip away at her defensive posture and get her excited about writing.

At one point, I discussed the power of writing to transform, and of its ability to paint a picture with words. The glare softened somewhat, and she sat up a bit straighter in her chair. I talked about how meaning is conveyed in description, and as an example described my dad's face when as a teenager I traipsed through the front door well after my curfew, versus simply writing my dad got angry to convey the same information.

Afterwards, I assigned a descriptive essay for following week. She was the first one out of the door.

The following week I collected their essays. Most students had written about a special pair of shoes, an engagement ring, or a family photo. She wrote about her father's pickup truck, the way its engine sputtered coming up a hill, and the uneven

beam of its headlights when her dad came looking for her through the fog of night. This young woman described the torn red leather, the smell of Old Spice and Marlboros, an already empty pack crumpled on the dashboard. She described her father's face as she climbed in the pickup at 3 in the morning with beer on her breath, and a baby in her belly.

This student's draft essay illustrated a talent that took my breath away. As it turned out, she was a single mom working full-time during the day and going to school at night. Her father continued to be a source of support, but she was struggling to find her way and take care of her child.

Another adjunct college instructor, Rosemary Teetor at Clackamas Community College, recalls a student in her Adult Basic Skills class, a course aimed at the development of transferable skills to better compete in the workforce.

Teetor's classroom consisted mostly of construction workers or loggers whose occupational lineage went as far back as an old growth Douglas Fir. These men were looking to transition into management jobs, but feared their only connection to it was a sheet of eight and a half by eleven.

Teetor recalls, "This one guy was big, sat in the front row, primed and ready for a fight. He gave me the stink eye for over an hour. I knew he was going to challenge me and he did. He raised his hand and without a moment's hesitation in front of the whole class, began his rant: in construction for 30 years, whole family in construction, said he wasn't learning anything, that he had none of skills I had gone over, and wanted no part of it.

The caption above my head might as well have read Uh Oh. Here I was, this female instructor trying to convince this former construction worker that he had transferable skills to be a success as a helpdesk technician. However, I recognized that fear underlay his resistance and that providing a bridge to cross into his new life was the key to defusing his anger.

I reframed the discussion and asked the former construction worker how interpreting safety regulations and explaining them to workers was different from interpreting and explaining how software works to users? I connected that skill set to a similar set in a new occupation.

In that moment - the light bulb moment - it became apparent that he did have the skills necessary to not only join, but flourish in a new occupation. His anger

evaporated instantly. I still get chills when I think about that man and that class.” Had Teetor reacted to the mud, no one would have seen the lotus.

Another form of resistance common to the college classroom is that of diversity. Oftentimes, the public college classroom is the first encounter students have with the “other” as in folks of another race, sexual orientation or economic class. Put to good use, this resistance can be used as the alchemy to dissipate fear and foster a foundation for lifelong learning.

Another adjunct educator at Mt. Hood Community College, placed a soccer mom, gay male hairdresser, middle management returning student, a Hispanic man, and an eighteen year old college freshman in the same peer editing group. Their objective was to read and provide constructive feedback to each other's essay.

To the average observer this may seem a recipe for disaster. In fact the instructor may have reached for her worry beads more than a few times. However, what emerged from this diverse think tank was a bond forged by a shared struggle; as much a lesson in overcoming fear of the unknown, as in learning to how to repair comma splices and fragment sentences.

While the contributions of public school educators are often overlooked compared with the likes of rock stars, Oprah, and MTV, educators recognize daily, the potential buried in resistance, and work to unearth the lotus in each student.

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