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BEYOND THE "MEASURABLE" OBJECTIVE—FEELING

Teaching undergraduate college survey courses in history represents a unique challenge in this technological age. Students grudgingly tolerate the requirements of the humanities sections they must endure to complete their degree requirements. The task of touching a responsive chord is often predicated on finding some commonality between instructor and students, and the time and the events being presented.

Approaching any new era or section of the text, I generally scurry to my personal library and look for some of the literature of the period—letters, poems, anything that will assist my charges in making connections with the players of past human drama. Reminding students of an old concept—i.e., they could doubtless list a thousand inventions from the last hundred years, but not one new human emotion in the last ten thousand—illustrates the point that there is a degree of sameness in the fabric of the human experience. In attempting to bridge the chasm of time, one must make the effort to create a feeling and an emotional kinship between the audience and the participants in past events. On occasion, it is the instructor who becomes the bridge to creating a sense of camaraderie and an emotional tie between the past and the present, the student and the instructor. What follows is an illustration of a means and method in setting a mood that draws a class into the spirit of an era.

The lecture went as usual. The college history class sat absorbed with the treatment I was giving to World War I. The students listened to the music I brought in from the period and looked with what appeared to be attentive consideration at the propaganda posters, photos, and slides of that long-ago era. All in all, I was reasonably satisfied with the impact the presentation was having on my students.

My intention, on that particular day, was to conclude the class by reading some of the poetry that had emerged from the Great War and, if nothing more, provide my charges with a touch of the emotion captured in the works of Owen, Service, Graves, Seeger, and Sassoon. With the large lecture hall lights dimmed and the room quiet, I thumbed through the well-worn pages of old volumes and softly gave voice to the words of poets, now long-dead, who had once poured out with such painful eloquence the tale of that war which was intended to end all wars. The final offering of the session was a short piece by Siegfried Sassoon, titled "Together." Interestingly enough, the poem is not a treatise on the conflict, but rather the resurrection of a memory, a melancholy memory, of a dead friend.

When I had completed the final reading and gently closed the book, I noted for the class that soldiers carried their dead and wounded from the battlefield, both figuratively and literally, and that they carried them forever enshrined in some far recesses of their hearts. The survivors would carry their slain comrades through time and remember, and remember, and remember, and that each day would bring a recollection of some youthful companion and the association forged in the fiery crucible of combat.

As is my custom, I asked for questions or comments. One young man politely asked if it wasn't just a bit of an exaggeration to suggest that those particular memories—memories of pain and anguish and such vivid images of death—would return every day, forever. As the assembled students waited for a response, I stood leaning against the lectern pondering my answer and slowly, ever so slowly, turned and studied the gold ring on my right hand.

So much of college teaching is an effort to capture the attention of the students, as well as their imaginations. In so doing, at times one shares a bit of one's self. That sharing can illuminate and provide a reference point for a young mind, and it can also prove painful for the professor who revisits old wounds for the purpose of answering a polite and legitimate question. In the vernacular of education, the youngster's question had provided a "teaching moment." Glancing down at the ring I had worn for so many years, I slowly slid it from my finger and silently reread the inscription that I had read every day since I had earned the privilege of wearing that symbol of my college. Now was the time to

share and to read the inscription for a college audience; it was time to risk a bit of pain to provide a bit of illumination.

The unfolding of the ring's story to my class was really very simple and uncomplicated. I had come home from Vietnam and returned to complete my college studies. Upon graduation, I received my ring and ordered the inscription. Most of my classmates had the engraver enter their name and degree. I, on the other hand, opted for something far more personal. The inscription in my class ring reads,

Sgt. J. A. Batemen, USMC
K.I.A. May 1969
Vietnam

After I read the inscription to my students, the lecture hall was hushed and still. I went on to tell them a bit about Jim Batemen, the young Marine sergeant who lost his life during his second tour in Vietnam, more than 30 years before. I shared with them that every year since his death I make the trek to Arlington Cemetery where he rests, and I pass a brief and quiet hour with my dearest friend. My story continued as I told them my reasoning for inscribing his name on the inside of my ring. I came home, you see, and he did not. I was blessed with the family, home, and education that we both so wanted. His name is in my ring because in a small way I wanted him to share my journey and my life—and indeed he has.

The lecture concluded, and the students made their way out—all but one who lingered for a time. The lad who had asked the question remained. He graciously thanked me for the story and offered the observation that combat veterans obviously do remember and remember daily. He made his way down the hall, and I slowly returned to my office to reshelve the books of poetry, to sit quietly, to look at the inscription in my ring, and to pass a brief moment with my old friend.

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