Nothing Without Joy: A Parable of Learning

by Lisa J. Rosowsky

Emily's hair was magenta when I first met her. In those days, I taught introductory level design courses, which often held 23 or more students, and I was in the habit of jotting down notes in tiny script next to students' names in my attendance book to learn names quickly. At the school where I teach—the country's oldest public four-year college of art and design—such notes might read: nose ring, Celtic tattoo, eyebrow stud, dreadlocks. And so I wrote "magenta hair" into my book and began the semester.

My attendance book is about 10 years old and looking its age. One of my colleagues, who keeps a separate sleek black notebook for each course, told me once that it looked like something from World War II. I'll agree that it is a veteran of sorts. In my attendance book is the class list for every course I have taught—from the first page of neatly printed names and carefully formed check-marks to last semester's hasty scrawl penned with whatever I could dig out of the bottom of my briefcase. Though the cover is almost torn off now and its corners are worn to fuzz, I continue to use my attendance book because it is a tangible history of my teaching. Its

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pages stand as a record of how I have grown as a teacher, just as individual names leap out to remind me of my mistakes and missed opportunities. It is not just Emily who calls to me but a dissonant chorus of voices from across the years, each in its characteristic tone.

At first, Emily stood out only by the vibrancy of her hair—bright even by art school standards. She was a student of ordinary talent, and she handed in ordinary work. But I liked her laconic wit, which she expressed in the drawn-out vowels of her native Maine—she showed the same unlikely combination of naivete and hard-edged self-sufficiency that I have noticed in other students from that northern state. Emily's father was a cabinet-maker and computer-tinkerer, a booming man by the name of Big Al who closely followed his daughter's progress in the design program and managed to refurbish whatever computer hardware she needed.

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Although Emily's work in her sophomore year left hardly a ripple in the department, there was something compelling about her. I have always had a soft spot for my sarcastic students, sarcasm so clearly a veil thrown over some passion they could not yet name. Emily was waitressing in the city that first summer, and I hired her to help me with an exhibition I was designing for the college. She showed up with her head shaved: Joan of Arc in cargo pants. Watching her wield power tools gave me my first glimpse of how well she used her hands—so different from the young woman whose sketches were tentative and bland, whose typography was lackluster. She was confident that summer in a way I had not seen before, and she could *build*.

At the beginning of her junior year, Emily found her way to a little-known papermaking class, one of those random choices that in retrospect seems to have been predestined. She practically danced into our classroom those first few weeks, flourishing scraps of handmade parchment, flax paper, and papyrus. She seemed as happy as I had ever seen her.

In my class, however, it was a different story. The students were laboring over a difficult design project: a book of prose and poetry by Edgar Allan Poe. I had read them "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Bells" by candlelight in our darkened classroom. Now with the design of their books, they were to find a contemporary connection to Poe's words, to a style of language that most of them found antiquated and offputting at first, only gradually becoming accessible through the kind of repeated reading the

setting of type entails. The project required them to handle extensive text typography with fluidity and confidence. Everyone struggled, but no one as hard as Emily. She could make no connection to the abstraction which characterizes typography.

Our design program graduates only 30 to 40 students a year, and the critique format—unique to art and architecture schools—limits second- and third-year class sizes to between 10 and 20. Such relatively small classes give the program a "little red schoolhouse" feel in which students quickly come to know each other very well. With a broad collective perspective, the students see one another's strengths and weaknesses expressed in multiple courses and across several semesters. They are quick to round out my focused criticisms with more general and personal observations. This was why the class pushed Emily—and hard. Each week she brought in her layouts—type and images composed on the page—and each week the other students told her they weren't good enough. Or they didn't understand her concept. Or the work just plain looked wrong. After one especially tense critique, her voice broke with rage and tears. "I *hate* this assignment," she spat as she swept out of the room.

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The next time we saw Emily, something had changed. After her outburst the week before, Emily's classmates sucked in their breath when she arrived with her completed Poe book, readying themselves to praise her for any small improvement and move on to the next assignment. (Brutally honest though they are in critiques, my students seem instinctively to avoid the cruelty of a complete tear-down at the final showing of someone's work.) But what Emily pulled from her bag was not like anything she had shown us before; it was unlike any book we had seen from *anyone* before. Her book was bound in a rough-flecked dun-colored paper and in the center of the cover, straining under the wrapping as if pulsing beneath a shroud, was a heart. She had sculpted a perfect human heart, cast it in rubber, then embedded it into her own handmade paper. All of the paper inside the book was made with her own hands as well.

In one of those quietly miraculous moments of educational synthesis, it had occurred to Emily to harness the energy of her papermaking work and link it to her design work. In theory, the book's substrate shouldn't have made a difference in how she designed it—but it made all the dif-

ference in the world. When she laid her book on the classroom table, there was a new harmony between the soft paper, with its feathery deckle edges, and the typography that lay upon it. Emily made the paper, and the strain of the type eased as she allowed the words to lie quietly upon the page. She was no longer trying to copy the edgier, hipper typography of her classmates, which fit her like borrowed shoes. Emily made the paper, and she began to find herself.

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Later, she would tell me, "It was the first time I could make something start-to-finish as a designer. Everything before was just printouts on computer paper—this book was like a piece of art for me. And making art was why I came to art school." And so it was as a bookbinder that Emily discovered her true passion.

I routinely teach my juniors the skill of basic bookbinding, which they apply not only to my projects—such as the Poe book—but to the production of their own design portfolios the following year. I have some training in this, just enough so that what I teach is a kind of "gonzo binding." Emily—with her father's hands, after all—enrolled in a semester-long bookbinding course and quickly surpassed me. What things she made! Books with richly embossed covers, books that opened in multiple directions, books nested within books: books made for the joy of making books. No one would guess, looking at this young woman whose frayed pant legs dragged over the backs of her black sneakers, that she mitered corners neatly, cut a perfect angle, and reveled in what she called the "anal art of bookbinding."

Who can say whether it was maturity, or the weight of an extra year's critiques, or simply finding her metier that led her to further success, but Emily's design work improved immensely as what was in her head at last rose to meet what was in her hands. She became a valued resource to her classmates and the class behind her, to whom she generously demonstrated bookbinding on several occasions. After staying on for an additional year to develop her blossoming design voice, Emily graduated with the department's blessing and frank admiration.

Right about here would be a good place for a happy ending, but I cannot give you one. At least not yet.

I got an e-mail from Emily a while ago, the first since graduation. She

was back in Maine, living on her own but near her family and working as a designer for a "giftware company," a manufacturer of the kind of Down East trinkets that tourists can buy in every roadside gift shop. She had interrupted her work on the design of a lobster placemat to write to me. She joked weakly about the irony of having spent her teenage years shelling lobsters to save money for art school, only to end up back where she started. Emily's tone was light, but the humiliation that lay beneath was real. I read her e-mail and squirmed with anguish, for I had seen this coming. Her books were stunning but they made for an unusual portfolio, and I feared for her. My personal notes from last year, around the time the faculty were guiding our seniors in the design of their portfolios, read "What to recommend to Emily? Where can she possibly find her place?"

Such questions point to the heart of my struggle as a teacher: helping my students locate something authentic in their work and in themselves while preparing them to work in a profession that purports to honor both, but often honors neither. Is this conflict unique to the teaching of design? Is it a product of design's uneasy straddling of the worlds of academe and commerce? A teacher of English literature at the undergraduate level, for example, could freely assume that few of her students would become "professional" literature scholars upon graduation. The liberal arts credo is its greatest advantage: Let students learn how to *think*, then they could go and figure out how to earn a living.

But design is something else. Designers need a portfolio to apply for a job, and the portfolios—those perfect boxes filled with perfect work—

are a reflection of the state of the profession the students are so keen to enter. Despite their pleas for creative thinkers, those doing the hiring want nothing more than to see what's already on the market, and students know this. How many of my students have told me they chose to major in design because "painters don't eat," especially those whose parents told them point-blank if they went to art school they wouldn't get a dime for tuition.

Who am I to tell students not to concern themselves with getting a well-paying job when they leave school? After all, it's part of our mission as a public college to prepare our graduates to enter the workforce—a mission that originated in the 19th century with a mandate to provide a visual arts education for all citizens of the Commonwealth—and we do that very well, year after year.

It's just that, well, I'm a teacher first. And while I do teach my students typography, composition, color, and print production—the nuts and bolts in a designer's tool kit—that is not the most satisfying part of my job. What I love is teaching students about the importance of concept to design, then watching as one-by-one they begin to understand what it means to have an idea, a genuine idea of their own that springs from an understanding of the content. I love seeing the light of relief in a student's eyes when she realizes that it's OK to use her own drawings in her design work (I show the students my own work, and they are stunned to see that design can be personal, showing the work of the designer's hands). Most of all, I love finding the student who is different in some way. The one who is searching, maybe without knowing yet that he is searching, for the

thing out there which will make all of it—his talent, education, life—come together. Emily was such a student.

One of the teachers I try to model myself after is one whom I have never met: the educator Vivian Gussin Paley, who writes memorably about how children in her kindergarten classroom use stories to shape and understand the world around them.[1] She records students' language—with its frankness and humor and odd logic—and lets their words stand unfettered by critical analysis. In the world of her kindergartners, there is an almost endless tolerance for what adults would view as difference. Inspired by the instinctive openness of young children, Paley refuses to attach labels to those whom clinicians might diagnose as autistic or impaired. Instead, she watches and listens as the children make space in their play for every kind of learning style and personality. They encourage special gifts to be deployed while creatively finding ways to work around weaknesses, and they seem to do this effortlessly. Are there lessons from Paley's kindergarten class that I can use in my college-level classroom? Absolutely.

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I strive to maintain an openness to difference in the classroom. By "openness" I mean more than just acceptance but *receptivity*, that flickering radar inside that alerts me to the presence of someone different. It may take a while to recognize and put a name to that difference, and so I wait. It might be a special skill, or even a seemingly mismatched set of skills, that tips me off. Several years ago, I had a student with exceptional model-making and woodworking skills whom I eventually recognized as being perfectly equipped for exhibition design. Now a successful exhibition designer, he told me recently that he has found what he truly loves to do. "I'd rather never design again," he said, "than not do what I'm doing now."

I would no more expect all of my students to reach this level of fulfillment than I would the rest of the population. It is rare, something to be treasured but not anticipated. But I can create an atmosphere in my classroom where that kind of fulfillment is at least possible for every student, but especially for the "different" student. Like her students, writes Paley, "I too require passion in the classroom," and I agree that passion is the key to the kingdom. If a student can experience even just a taste of his or her own passion through one of my assignments, or through work

of my own or of others that I have brought in to show, or a technique I have demonstrated—such as bookbinding—then I have helped to set into motion a transformation so pronounced that it will thrill and inspire not only me but every student who witnesses it.

But what about when such transformations collide with the demands of the real world? One of Emily's first major interviews was with a well-known footwear manufacturer whose printed materials reflect the company's aura of refinement and moneyed good taste. After flipping through her portfolio, the interviewer announced that Emily had spent "too much time on the books," presumably at the expense of the kind of commercial-looking projects that would prove her readiness to join the ranks of production designers—the many thousands of technically trained operators manning computers, scanners, and other machines that grind out millions of pages of ephemera. These production designers are sometimes called "wrists," the way those in the lowest ranks of the construction industry are "backs."

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Emily did not get the shoe job but did accept a position at the giftware company. "My time is filled with production work," she wrote. "I'm getting all the experience producing things quickly that anyone will ever need. What I do is completely the antithesis of what I want to do with design and my life."

My experience as a designer has given me my own insights into this tension between design education and what the world demands. Like Emily, I take great pleasure in making things with my hands, often combining printmaking with bookbinding. I draw on dreams, journals, and family stories for inspiration and text. Although I had worked for several years in the publishing industry, I was vaguely ashamed of what I had produced there and kept it stashed at the bottom of my portfolio, showing it less and less as time went by. Instead, I crafted my portfolio around the projects which spoke more deeply to me—design work for my arts and nonprofit freelance clients—and showed it around to some of the more respected studios, searching for the job I believed would rescue me from publishing.

One design director after the next said the same words: "Your work is lovely, really, but it's just not the kind of work we do." It was years before I recognized I was trying to fit myself into an industry where no natural

space existed. Gradually, I came to see that the clients who made me happiest were those whom my work made happy, and I built a small but steady business around designing for the arts and nonprofit sector.

All this I wrote about to Emily, adding one other story that I had never before shared. There was a time when I first began teaching that I needed more money than my meager salary provided, and I signed on with a design temp agency in the city. My first assignment—which would turn out to be my last—was at a small studio housed in a charmingly renovated barn in a woodsy suburb. My job was to redesign a direct mail piece for a photo development company. (No doubt you have seen the bright yellow mailing envelopes wedged in with the Sunday newspaper supplements.) I worked on that project for three days, and when I walked out the door I had earned a tidy sum and one precious bit of self-knowledge, my own Kodak moment: I would never again, for any amount of money, do work so unfulfilling, so mindless, so far from what I had come to learn about myself and my strengths.

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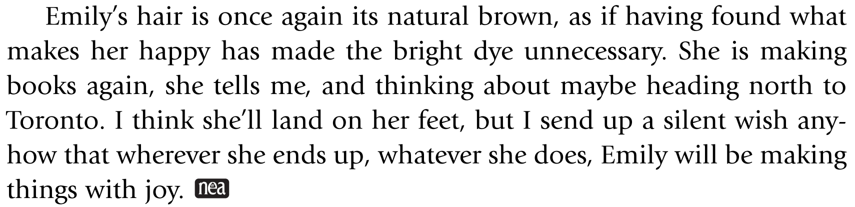
The noted architect and designer Maya Lin speaks of her work in terms of "a strong, clear vision" that guides her safely past the conflicting, clamoring voices of clients, critics, and detractors. I live by another phrase, *niente senza gioia*, or "nothing without joy": the joy a clear vision brings, the joy of making with one's hands what is felt in one's heart.

Thanks to Emily, I now live under the phrase as well. I hired Emily again the following summer, this time to paint the words in foot-tall letters high up on the wall of my office. I was three months pregnant with my second child and didn't trust myself on a ladder—I knew Emily needed a pricey design textbook that she couldn't afford, so a deal was struck. Now, when I sit in my office, in the few precious minutes between student conferences and drop-in chats with colleagues, I often look up and seem to see Emily again on a ladder, brushes bristling from her pockets and between her teeth, carefully painting the curves and delicate serifs of Bodoni italic, her face three inches away from the letterforms.

Perhaps some of the spirit of *gioia* seeps into one's soul at such a short distance. Or maybe the words were unnecessary to a student already won over to a teacher's view of the importance of finding—or making—work that fulfills. But now the phrase *niente senza gioia* and Emily have become one. There will be, I hope, more students in the course of my career who

exemplify this spirit, but I will always remember Emily because she was the first to transform herself so openly and leave her mark on my wall as proof.

"Your lobster placemat will do for you what that photo envelope did for me," I reassured Emily in my e-mail. "You will make a vow to get the heck out of there, and things will get better."



Emily's hair is once again its natural brown, as if having found what makes her happy has made the bright dye unnecessary. She is making books again, she tells me, and thinking about maybe heading north to Toronto. I think she'll land on her feet, but I send up a silent wish anyhow that wherever she ends up, whatever she does, Emily will be making things with joy. nea

ENDNOTE

[1] Paley, Vivian Gussin. *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997.