

# AN APPRECIATION

by J.D. Scrimgeour

Late afternoon, the fifth floor hallway nearly empty. Far down the corridor, there's one door ajar; the rest of the faculty offices are sealed behind opaque yellow windows. My professor, John Eakin, unlocks his door, and the two of us step inside and sit, he in a swivel chair, and I in a hard wooden one. My backpack thuds onto the tile floor. Over his left shoulder are rows of autobiographies and scholarly books on autobiography. He brings his hands up in front of his chest and presses his fingers against each other, making a see-through pyramid. His slack hair parts to the left; short, but somehow not neat, a few strands escaping. Glasses, a thin face.

"I'm worried about my paper." I had a 25-page seminar paper due in less than two weeks. I'd turned in an eight-page proposal, with an outline and an annotated bibliography, and it had been severely and accurately critiqued by the class the day before.

It's spring semester, my first year in graduate school at Indiana University. I'd considered myself a poet—I was getting a Masters in Fine Arts—but I was taking a literature seminar on autobiography, Eakin's spe-

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cialty. Before the semester began, I had called him to ask whether I'd be qualified to take the class. I was only a creative writer, after all, with an interest in his field. He said he'd be happy to have me.

It was an afternoon class, one that, at the beginning of the semester, adjourned just as dusk descended on the campus. The light, despite the wall of windows, always seemed stale. Six of us crowded around one end of the long table. Even for a seminar room, it felt empty.

In the first class, Eakin had tried to encourage discussion, but his own excitement got in his way. He would get carried away, speaking animatedly, thin arms contorting into oblique angles, rising from his chair and scrawling ideas on the board in complex diagrams. To me, those ideas were often incomprehensible, but he was so earnest and energetic that I felt I just needed to try harder.

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the class was a refreshing break from the intensive creative work I was doing. For the past few days, though, I was deeply regretting having enrolled in it. I knew that my plan for the paper was weak, and now, embarrassingly, the class knew it, too. I was used to harsh critiques in poetry workshops, and was able to dismiss those because of a brash, unjustified confidence in my own creative work. But I had little faith in my scholarship. I was haunted by a dismal year I'd spent in Columbia's master's program. The words of one of the faculty readers for my master's essay still fueled my self-doubt. He had called my language "enervating" and quoted a passage of mine to underscore his point, introducing it with, "Listen to this one. . ."

*I'm worried about my paper.* Eakin was leaning back in his chair, his fingers still pressing into each other. "Frankly, I'm worried, too," he said, simply. It was not the response I had expected. It was not an awkward evasion, tinged with pity and condescension. He was not exaggerating the few positives to make me feel that some tinkering would suffice. And yet it was not a cruel response. He was emphasizing neither his expertise nor my ignorance.

He was *worried*, about *me*. And he was willing to tell me so. We were both worried; we were in this together. He summarized the criticisms that I'd heard, crystallizing my problems. He did not do it discouragingly, yet

he did not do it encouragingly. He was showing me the obstacles ahead. How I would deal with them was up to me.

I left the office a few minutes later, neither crestfallen nor buoyed, but focused, and weary—anticipating all the work to be done. Later that week, a Friday afternoon, I slipped a revised draft of the proposal into his mailbox at school. The next morning, after another night of writing, I was awakened by the phone. I crawled out of my narrow dorm bed and opened the wooden cabinet in the wall that housed the swiveling phone I shared with my neighbor. It was Mr. Eakin, calling to tell me that the proposal now looked good. He had one or two pertinent questions about it, but said it was much clearer. I hung up the phone and, rather than going back to bed, took a few enthusiastic hops, then clicked on my computer to go back to work.

As the computer began humming, I couldn't help but think of him and of the effort that he had made. At the end of the work week, finding some pages of a desperate

student in his box, he had spent his Friday evening reading over them, assessing. He had worked around any plans he may have made—possibly time with his family or his own reading and writing. He must have recognized my effort, and the phone call was his way of letting me know it, an assertion of quiet, firm faith. I did fine on that paper, and I went on to get a Ph.D. in American Literature. I wrote my dissertation on autobiography, with John Eakin as my advisor.

I still refer to him as “Mr. Eakin,” except to his face. He'd asked that I call him “John” as we shook hands after lunch a few weeks after the seminar had ended. Now I can almost do it without thinking, but for a long time, it seemed unnatural, a slight.

Like all good teachers, he taught by example. He freed me as a student because he had freed himself from the debilitating notion of college professor as all-knowing. Once, in a conversation about graduate exams, he confessed to not having read a book, some classic by Dickens (me, neither! my mind shouted). In that first seminar, as we were struggling through a passage from an essay, he made a liberating, frank admission: “I confess,” he said, “that there are times when I find this essay impenetrable” (me too!).

Such admissions were not celebrations of ignorance. Eakin is perhaps the most respected scholar in his field. At a National Endowment for the

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Humanities seminar that I attended, he came in to give a guest lecture, and he was introduced as “Mr. Autobiography.” He has been a keynote speaker at international conferences, and has published some of the most influential and most cited books in his field. Occasionally, my eyes became bleary trying to read them. His own writing is difficult, but it is generally clearer and more readable than the essays he assigned.

Despite his status, Eakin possesses an openness to learning. One semester, I served as a teaching assistant for his 19th century American Literature class—150 students in an echoing hall, he generally lecturing, asking the occasional question. When I and the other TAs team-taught one class as part of our workload, he sat in the audience, a few rows back. Working off planned notes, but speaking informally, we led the class through some Hawthorne stories. Unlike Eakin, we elicited student questions and comments, and built our ideas on them.

Eakin listened, fully engaged, and waved his hand a few times to add comments. He swiveled his neck, noting the liveliness of the class, the students raising their hands, commenting, laughing. Afterwards, he told us that he’d been inspired, and the next class he departed from a set lecture and stepped out from behind the podium, even calling on a few students.

True teaching only occurs organically, even accidentally. As in writing, one stumbles upon moments of connection, moments that might help shape a life. The most valuable and lasting lessons from a class are almost




never the teacher's main points. Some flip comment can crystallize into astonishing truth in the student's mind. The teacher may never know.

At the time I was to take my graduate exams, Indiana University was instituting a new exam process. To help students prepare for their dissertations, the exams no longer aimed to be comprehensive, but focused on the individual student's research interests; in fact, depending on the advisor, the student could construct the reading list, and even the exam itself. The guidelines for the exam were vague, and this was causing confusion; some advisors and committees were encouraging student input, while others were demanding students still prepare for more broad-based exams.

Eakin encouraged me to develop my own question. "It's easy to find out what someone doesn't know," he explained to my committee. The implication: that it is harder to discover what knowledge and perspective someone does offer, and that a teacher's charge is to help the

student make such discoveries. Only gradually has the full wisdom of his statement become clear; over time, I have assimilated it into not only my teaching, but also my life. Each person has something to teach, and can learn from himself. He or she just might need a little help seeing how.

In this era of tests and accountability in education, when raising scores is the mark of educational success, John's idea establishes a different, bolder standard of educational rigor. If you get your working-class students to answer one more question right on a standardized test, you will have turned them into middle-class students. Congratulations. But will they remember any words that you have said, will they take them home and carry them for years? Will your sentences be helping to shape their world? Will they remember you the way I will reminisce about John years from now, still referring to him, respectfully, as "Mr. Eakin"? 

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