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ENGLISH 99

Literacy among the ruins

By Frank Gannon

Recently, a small college asked me to teach. I was told that I'd be teaching writing. This sounded pretty good to me. It might be interesting, and I might find some kid who was very talented. Then I would bring him along, nurture the talent, and, at the end of the movie, when he was winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, he would say, "I want to thank Frank Gannon, who first taught me how to write." Then they'd show me, a really old guy in a hospital bed watching him accept the Nobel Prize on television. He'd say some little dumb thing that the kid used to say when he was first learning how to be great from me. Something from the time when he was rebellious and I was crusty-but-lovable... Then they would play "triumphant" music.

I bought a herringbone jacket. I couldn't find one with those leather elbow patches. I tried at Men's Wearhouse. The sales guy told me they didn't make them anymore, but the guy looked like the sergeant in *Gomer Pyle* and probably didn't travel in academic circles, so I doubt that he knew.

But the coat was very tweedy. I put it on and looked at myself in the mirror. I used Robin Williams in *Good Will Hunting* as my goal and I was very close.

I thought I would be teaching some kind of nonfiction creative-writing thing at the college. I was told that not enough students were interested. The little college was hard up for money, and small classes, such as my proposed "English 393: Nonfiction Writing," were not very profitable.

Instead, I wound up teaching a class called English 99, a profitable course. English 99 wasn't like most of the other courses at the college. It didn't "count" as a course for the bach-

elor's degree. It was held in a college classroom, but taking it didn't give you any credits toward a degree. English 99 was a pass/fail course for students who, according to the college, were going to be "overly challenged" by the introductory English course, English 101. English 101 at the college was not the intellectual equivalent of boot camp, but many of the students at the college weren't ready for that kind of hurdle. The class met for one hour three times a week. After a student passed English 99, he or she would be theoretically prepared to take the first college English course.

The administration at the college didn't like to draw attention to English 99 because the course didn't "work." Most of those who took English 99 never seemed to get anywhere close to graduating, and a lot of them, discouraged by the rigor of English 99, wouldn't ever take another college course for the rest of their lives.

The truth of the matter was that English 99 was there so that the college could get some money from these kids before they flunked out or quit. The college was shockingly expensive. Its main appeal was that it almost never rejected anyone who applied.

This whole thing was pretty cloudy from a moral perspective, but that wasn't a big factor for me, a person of cloudy morality. Compared with, say, the Sopranos, I was still semi-moral, sort of. At least I told myself that.

For me the troublesome moral implications were settled by two deciding factors: A) I could always say, in the immortal words of Joseph Goebbels: "Hey, I just work here."
B) Dental.

I liked the life of a professor. I spent much of my days reading the books I never got around

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TRAINING FOR life teaches living; but what training for the profitable living together of black men and white? A hundred and fifty years ago our task would have seemed easier. Then Dr. Johnson blandly assured us that education was needful solely for the embellishments of life, and was useless for ordinary vermin. To-day we have climbed to heights where we would open at least the outer courts of knowledge to all, display its treasures to many, and select the few to whom its mystery of Truth is revealed, not wholly by birth or the accidents of the stock market, but at least in part according to deftness and aim, talent and character. . . .

The tendency is here, born of slavery and quickened to renewed life by the crazy imperialism of the day, to regard human beings as among the material resources of a land to be trained with an eye single to future dividends. Race-prejudices, which keep brown and black men in their "places," we are coming to regard as useful allies with such a theory, no matter how much they may dull the ambition and sicken the hearts of struggling human beings. And above all, we daily hear that an education that encourages aspiration, that sets the loftiest of ideals and seeks as an end culture and character rather than bread-winning, is the privilege of white men and the danger and delusion of black. . . .

[N]o secure civilization can be built in the South with the Negro as an ignorant, turbulent proletariat. Suppose we seek to remedy this by making them laborers and nothing more: they are not fools, they have tasted of the Tree of Life. . . . [C]an any sane man imagine that they will lightly lay aside their yearning and contentedly become hewers of wood and drawers of water? . . .

Above our modern socialism, and out of the worship of the mass,

must persist and evolve that higher individualism which the centres of culture protect; there must come a loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammelled alike by old and new. Such souls aforesaid have inspired and guided worlds, and if we be not wholly bewitched by our Rhinegold, they shall again. Herein the longing of black men must have respect: the rich and bitter depth of their experience, the unknown treasures of their inner life, the strange renderings of nature they have seen, may give the world new points of view and make their loving, living, and doing precious to all human hearts. And to themselves in these the days that try their souls, the chance to soar in the dim blue air above the smoke is to their finer spirits boon and guerdon for what they lose on earth by being black.

I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land?

— W.E.B. DU BOIS

"Of the Training of Black Men,"
The Souls of Black Folk
(1909)

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to when I was a student, and it was pleasant putting on my professor costume and walking around on the campus.

A student would see me and say, "Dr. Gannon." I would wave in a low-key, academic way. I wasn't really a "doctor" or anything; I was just a magazine writer. But the students didn't know that. They assumed that I, like all the other professors, had a Ph.D.

I was a pseudo-professor. "Dr. Gannon." That sounded strange but good. I'd always wave. I thought of getting a pipe.

Of course, I was an impostor. But so was the class I taught. I was posing as a professor and English 99 was posing as a college course.

There were three definite types of students in the class: Bored-looking girls, jocks, and, this year, a new category: Bosnian refugees. A wealthy alumnus of the college had established a grant for the victims of the war in Bosnia. The young Bosnians at the college were there because of the grant. It enabled them to enroll in the college, take courses, and, hopefully, start a new life in America.

Many of these Bosnian young people had been college students in their native country before the war had shattered their lives. Now that they were in America it was no longer important that they were Serbs or Croats or Christians or Muslims. They were now Bosnian people beginning over in America.

A lot of the Bosnian kids were extremely bright. Some of them had been pre-med and pre-law students before the tragic war, but because most of these kids were just learning English, they were natural candidates for English 99.

So the situation was set. Two huge vehicles, the "Horror-of-the-World Truck" and the "Stupidity-of-the-World Truck," were about to run into each other. I was there to watch. If this had involved insurance, the police and the insurance company would have interrogated me. As it was, I just watched.

(I have disguised the identities of both the college and the students for reasons that will, I think, become obvious to the reader.)

There was no "seating chart" in English 99, so anyone could sit anywhere in the room, but, for some reason, the classes always segregated themselves. The groups all sat together, which, I thought, underlined their status as specific groups. The English 99 classroom was large, and there was enough room to establish a sort of buffer zone of empty desks around each group.

Again, the three groups were:

1. The Bored-Looking Girls
2. The Jocks
3. The Refugees

After the first day of class, no one ever

changed desks, so the sense of three distinct groups was emphasized. This was, of course, a writing-exercise class, so the content of the writing was not as important as the form. The idea was to get the students good enough at writing English that they could have a chance in English 101.

The first day, I tried to explain writing English to the class. I told them that writing was more like playing golf or the piano than it was like other courses. Writing wasn't really a subject to be studied. That is, writing English prose was more a skill than a body of acquired knowledge, like, say, history, or psychology, or biology. It was an activity more than something that can be studied. You don't *learn* it, you learn how to *do* it.

I used a lot of metaphors to get across this general idea. It was like juggling. Like riding a bicycle. Keep doing it and one day you wake up and you can do it. If you don't quit, you will get it. It is like golf. It is like tennis. It is like the hula hoop. It is like jumping rope. Like riding a bicycle.

It was very difficult to come up with something they had all done. The three groups—the bored-looking girls, the jocks, and the refugees—were like three separate countries. They were all trying to get to the same general place. But they were starting from places a million miles apart.

The writing of the three groups was very, very distinct, very particular. The writing of the bored-looking girls could never be mistaken for the writing of the jocks or the writing of the refugees. Except for the fact that they were written in English, the writings of the three groups were **DRASTICALLY** different.

Because we were just concerned with writing in general, I found it best to let the students write about anything they wanted. Despite that fact, however, the students wrote in-class essay after in-class essay on the same subjects.

The bored-looking girls always wrote about three topics. Topic one can be called "LIFE IS HARD":

It is very hard to have a relationship with a guy because it is hard to meet a guy that you like. When you meet them they never turn out to be the way you want them to be. Like this guy I went out with last summer. I thought he was sweet but I found out that he lied all the time. Right to my face. Incredible.

Topic two was "I CAN'T DO ANYTHING":

I always say I'm going to do something and then I never do it. Like this morning. I said that I was going to math class but I went to the Jiffy Mart and I bought a slushy and I drank it in the car with my girlfriend Mandy and it was hard to go to math class because it's so boring. I didn't go

so I didn't get my makeup test. So now I'm behind. I hate that. I have to apply myself.

Topic three was "I AM TIRED":

Today my roommate woke me up and I looked at the alarm clock and I was like I am so late! I just threw some clothes on and I didn't even put on much makeup and then I was like I'm so late anyway and I just went back to sleep. I have to stop doing this. It is very stressful because today's young person has drugs and peer pressure and yet is expected to go to college.

The jocks also had three subjects. One was "I HAVE FUN":

Last week my friends and I drove down to the beach and got a room. In the daytime we just hung out at the pool and at night we would go out and get some beer and go to places. We got there around nine and it was pretty empty. But by ten there were a lot of girls and we all met girls. It was just kick back and have some fun. And we had a good time. In the morning we got a bite to eat and then just hung out by the pool and caught some rays and drank a couple of beers. One afternoon we went to this mall they have near there. I bought some shoes. It was great. But then we had to go back to college again.

The jocks' topic two was "I NEED FREEDOM":

Why is it that the drinking age is twenty-one? That is so stupid because a person knows what he's doing and why should he have to wait until some-

Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers of the people alone. The people themselves therefore are its only safe depositories. And to render even them safe, their minds must be improved to a certain degree.

— THOMAS JEFFERSON (1781)

body says it's all right. And it just makes you want to drink more and if you can be in the army when you are eighteen then it doesn't make sense. You can get killed for the same country you can't drink in. It doesn't do any good and everyone knows it's stupid. In Europe I hear it isn't like that. Why can't it be like that in America? Don't get me wrong. You should drink sensibly. Like when we drink we always have a designated driver.

Three was "WHAT I CAN DO GOOD":

I started playing baseball when I was eight with T-ball. When I was twelve our team had won the region. I was the pitcher for that game and I have always had a good arm. When I was in high school we were second in the state and I won every game I pitched except one that I got hurt in. One year we

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won our division and it was awesome. I was like about the best player on that team. When I got to college I was nervous because I didn't have confidence about playing on this level but my dad said just relax and do the best you can and the first day I hit the ball real good so now I feel better about everything and I'm really looking forward to this year.

The refugees had only one theme, "LIFE":

When I was ten the war came in and people lost lives. We only have water on some days. People saw shooting and war came closer. I was in a building and a bomb went off and my friend was killed. I had to leave country without family. It changes everything. But war kept getting closer until we must leave. I walked by people dead in street. Cetnik and anti-Serb leave because nothing is left.

In Sarajevo soldiers say that they will bring a dream of making things fair. People I live with call Melmed in Bijeljina. Relatives all killed. U.N. has blue helmets take care of small problems. Milosevic and Karadzic do not do what they said. Can't help. Now I live in America and go to college here. I am trying to learn English. Difficult. First night was in Brooklyn. Very scary at night.

There would be students waiting outside the room. I unlocked the door to let the students in. Then I said, "I need coffee." I'd excuse myself and go downstairs to get coffee. When I got back, I saw a student paper on my desk:

Some people so hungry they eat tree. They put tree in boil water to make soft tree. Since began rationing green corn is best thing. But army and air force have nice meals. Here everything good.

Some of the Refugee Group's papers were narrative in nature.

My sister had friend. She said that soldiers took her off the street and hurt and then let her go. Then she cries never would come out of room. People say forget. That is hard for her. She stay in room.

I remember circling the verb and writing, "agreement?"

At the end of every semester I would have to give grades to the students. The only two grades were "Pass" and "Fail." I passed and failed a lot of bored-looking girls and a lot of jocks. Mostly they passed. You could take English 99 more than once, and a lot of students took it two and even three times. I never failed a refugee. I knew that English 101 would be hard for many of them, but I thought that I might be teaching English 99 again, and I still wouldn't be able to "correct" anything.

After a few weeks of English 99, I desperately wanted it to end. It had a bad effect on me. I started to dread Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. The dean's secretary called me one day. It was right after class, and I was thinking about an essay I had just read. The essay was about Sarajevo, about hiding.

I had just finished reading an essay about how guys can be so thoughtless that it's not even funny. Before that I had read an essay about people who wear designer clothes and how they are so snotty. Before that I read what happens when a bomb goes off in the middle of the night in your apartment building.

The dean wanted to see me. I was very happy to go.

The dean, a polite balding man in his late forties, told me, in a pleasant voice, that the college was trying to "get leaner." He was sorry, and this had nothing to do with my work, but he was going to have to cut me loose. I said that I appreciated everything the college had done for me. He said that I was "on the top of our list" if they ever hired more professors. We shook hands.

I was going to walk back up to my office. I remembered what I was doing when I left. I still had a lot more essays to read, but I went outside and walked home trying not to think in sentences. ■

Beyond the power of diffusing old wealth, [education] has the prerogative of creating new. It is a thousand times more lucrative than fraud; and adds a thousand fold more to a nation's resources than the most successful conquests.

— HORACE MANN (1849)

Sometimes the refugees write things that, if written by one of the other groups, would get me to write "nice detail" in the margin. Many times the only thing I could ever think of to write was "good." Sometimes I would look at the word after I wrote it and cross it out because it seemed like a stupid thing to write. So I would just circle things and correct sentences.

Adnan lived next door has hand blown in war.

I corrected it.

Adnan, who lived next door, had his hand blown off in the war.

Then I crossed out my corrected sentence. Sometimes after reading a few refugee papers I felt that instead of teaching English I was unlearning English.

Our class was at eight-thirty in the morning. Sometimes I would get there a few minutes late.