

Advent Reflection—2 December 2019

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My alarm would go off at 4:30 a.m., and I would lay there in the pre-dawn dark trying to fight off dread. I would get myself ready, descend from my third-floor apartment, and begin my 45-minute drive from Cincinnati out to Morrow, Ohio, home of Little Miami High School. It was the winter and spring after I finished my teaching license requirements through Xavier University's graduate program in secondary education (it would take me another few months to finish the rest of the degree), and I had received a phone call offering me a long-term replacement job teaching freshmen. The teacher for whom I was subbing had used her cached sick days to retire early to care for a husband who had suffered a serious accident, and I was taking over her classes with a few months left in the school year. Pardon the clichés, but in my nascent teaching career, it was “Baptism by Fire” or “Trial by Ordeal”—I quickly learned to shed all my naïve and idealistic visions of myself delivering fascinating lectures on Shakespeare or whatever while dozens of students looked on adoringly.

The reality was that one student (I never knew who) responded to my attempt to bribe them into liking me with Starbursts by chucking it at my head when I turned to the board. It clunked off the white surface inches from my skull—I still don't know whether he or she missed on purpose or simply had faulty aim—and when I whirled around, all 30 students suddenly found their worksheets to be very interesting. The reality involved multiple students simply refusing to take any quiz that I put in front of them; actually, they would carefully enter their names on the line and then stand, approach the front of the room, and hand back quizzes that were completely blank. Does that count as “taking” the quiz?

One student quickly became my nemesis. His name was Matt, and he was simply not buying any of my nonsense. It might seem ridiculous for a then 24-year-old man to be intimidated by an adolescent who probably barely weighed 2/3 as much and was a decade younger, but, yes, I was afraid of him. Adult authority, the altruism and nobility of the teaching profession—if Matt had heard of these things, they didn't impress him. I had purchased a belt with an artsy paint pattern on it (I was 24 and thought of myself as pretty hip). One day, as I passed out a quiz on *To Kill a Mockingbird* that Matt had no intention of completing beyond the name slot, he remarked with his trademark sneer, “nice belt.” I responded, “what, you don't like my belt?” He looked right in my eyes and said, “I don't like *you*,” and then handed me his blank quiz, another 0/30.

At a loss, I sought out the school librarian, who had become a confidant, or at least someone who didn't mind me venting. Because it was a tiny school in a tiny, remote, rural community, she knew most of the kids and their families. She told me some details about Matt's life. His father had left the family without a trace years ago, and since, his mom had sought out companionship in a series of dubious boyfriends, some of whom had pretended to show an interest in Matt, only to run off months or sometimes even a year later. Matt had learned to resent most men, particularly those in a certain age range, especially when they made the pretext of being his friend.

Later in the year, I gave the students a writing assignment in response to *Lord of the Flies*—describe a time when you overcame a fear. Matt's essay stunned me—it was surprising enough that he submitted a carefully crafted, multi-page work...it was actually *very good*. He told a childhood story about going to King's Island amusement park with his mom and sisters. He worried that his fear of heights would keep him from enjoying the rare day of bonding with his family because he would be too scared to ride the rollercoasters. His narration of his first ride was vivid and moving. I heaped praise on him both in my comments when I graded it and in person when I handed it back. Later that week, when I was working after school and the halls were mostly empty, I was walking back to my room from the copy machine. I heard, “Mr. Abell!” I turned around and saw Matt a dozen or so yards down the hall. When I met eyes with him, he simply gave me a curt nod and said “hey” and kept walking. It was a small gesture, but from then on, a wall came down between us.

When I read the story of the centurion in Matthew 8:5-11 for this reflection, I thought of Matt. Jesus meets a man in a position of imposing authority. He tells Jesus, “I tell this one ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does it.” And yet this powerful man comes to Jesus to pray for the well-being of his servant, and for this act of humility, Jesus heaps blessings upon him: “Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.” This story immediately spoke to me as it dissolves artificial boundaries of status and authority and reminds us of our shared humanity. I dreaded every day of my battle of wills with Matt, but now, years later, I think it's because I approached my teaching from the wrong perspective. I thought it was my job to impart my considerable wisdom and charisma onto grateful students, and when they resisted, I would overpower them. I forgot that I was not the master, but the servant. Matt's life was hard—he had been betrayed and abandoned repeatedly. It wasn't my job to cram superfluous literary knowledge into his walled-off mind; it was to play any small part I could in helping him grow as a person. My failures with Matt outweighed my successes, and I left Little Miami to start a new life in Louisville and here at St. X at the end of that school year. But this recollection reminds me to look at my students not as empty vessels but as people, and although I fail them sometimes, I hope that my time with Matt will help me be more like the Centurion—not intoxicated by the authority of my position or the ego-boost that can come with a successful class period, but one who cares deeply for the people in his life.

This Advent, I add to my prayers of gratitude and penance this brief request: God, please remind me to approach my days as a teacher with compassion.