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## Provocateur Piece\*

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# Spitballs and Sparks: Learning the Art of Grace

Andrew Rejan

Two English teachers who believed that they were like-minded discover, during a tumultuous team-teaching experience, unexpected differences in their teaching styles. In this narrative provocation, the author reconstructs moments of tension in team teaching and the path toward reconciliation, leading to a reflection on the complexity of the relationships teachers form with each other and their students. The attempt to cultivate a graceful, artful, humane imagination emerges as a vital part of both teachers' professional lives.

*For Lynda Sorensen<sup>1</sup>*

### I: Losing Our Fragile Bearing

At the end of July, long after the bustle of students in the halls had been replaced by the steady hum of the floor-waxing machine, Lynda and I convened in a nearly empty school building to begin planning for our team-taught Contemporary Fiction class. Our principal had proposed a team-teaching model as an alternative to small remedial classes, which allowed for increased individual attention but segregated struggling students, and to traditional co-taught classes, which partnered an academic teacher with a special education teacher, whose role in the heterogeneous environment was sometimes

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\*The term *provocateur* has its origin in then-NCTE President Sandy Hayes's welcome to the CEE 2013 Summer Conference, during which she shared her wish that she could swap the "troublemaker" label she had been given for her name badge at the International Society for Technology in Education conference the month before with then-NCTE Executive Director Kent Williamson's, who was fittingly labeled "provocateur." I can think of no better inspiration than Kent for this section. *TSJ*

limited due to a lack of content expertise. Lynda and I hadn't volunteered to work together, but our department chair assumed, because of our friendship, that we would be a congenial pair.

Having agreed to undertake a yearlong experiment in team teaching, we now faced the challenge of designing our course together and conceiving of how we might share in the daily teaching of the class. "What if," Lynda mused, "when the students walk through the doors of the classroom, they are stepping into the cover of a book?"<sup>2</sup> I was fascinated by the notion of walking into a book as a metaphor for reading a text actively and aesthetically, and then I realized that Lynda was speaking not only metaphorically but also literally, proposing that we could reimagine the physical space of the classroom, beginning with redesigning the entryway!

When I joined the high school faculty five years earlier—a 23-year-old beginning his first teaching job—Lynda was one of the first colleagues I met. In a windowless office, my department chair introduced me to Lynda, a member of the English department for more than three decades, and left her to advise me about planning for my new courses. At first, she seemed a diminutive presence, with a small and gentle voice, but as she spoke I could hear the force of her convictions, blended with open-heartedness and generosity. When I tentatively shared my frustration with formulaic writing assignments, Lynda nodded sympathetically. At the end of the conversation, she reached for my notebook and wrote her name in a flowery, almost calligraphic cursive, alongside her email address and her home and cell phone numbers.

For five years, my friendship with Lynda had helped sustain me through the absurdities of school politics and the indignities of school bureaucracy. Lynda was the conversation partner who shared my ideals of learning as experiential and transformative, and she was also a role model of the kind of teacher I thought I wanted to become.

And now we were teaching together, which should have been a dream come true, except that instead I felt as if the dream had ended abruptly, leaving us in an unsettling reality. No longer were Lynda and I floating through the ethereal plane of our shared wonderings; now we were struggling to co-inhabit the circumscribed space of the classroom. After a few weeks of team teaching, I found myself becoming painfully aware of the way our bodies occupied space. Lynda leaned in toward the students, sinking down, cat-like, into a student desk. Meanwhile, I could feel my words projecting strangely, hollowly, as if I were playing the role, speaking the script, of an oblivious character on a vast stage. I was not only an actor in the play but also

a spectator, watching, perturbed, as I grasped my chin and marched around the room in the long strides of some Dickensian pedagogue.

My practice as a teacher had been to build a rapport with students through the work of the class, inviting students into the literary discourse that I loved and showing them I valued their contributions to discussion. I found comfort in the steady rhythm of classroom routines—daily announcements, introduction of new assignments, several minutes for writing and thinking, some small-group conversation, and finally full-class discussion. Lynda was a freer spirit, less moored to plans and routines than I was, her openness to changing direction emblemized by the stacks of half-finished, past-due library books that decorated her desk. She might begin the class with a question about the students' reading experience, but if it hung in the air, unanswered, Lynda would steer the class on a different path, perhaps by playing an NPR clip that she thought might stimulate more discussion. In one of our debriefing sessions, Lynda reflected, "I think, 'I'm losing them, now let me try to do this to keep them,' where you are very persistent, intellectually persistent, and I think I get intimidated by the boredom on their faces."

As the weeks wore on, the lofty visions borne out of our summer planning meeting receded farther and farther into the distance. In her journal, Lynda wrote, "We found ourselves facing students who were not able to engage with literature in the ways we thought they would. Interference set in—resistance to reading, reluctance to speak, satisfaction with the minimum, lack of interest, loss of meaning." We were haunted and demoralized by the recurring ping of text messages, eyes pointed downward to cell phones held in laps, constant bathroom breaks, and blank stares. The interference that enveloped us only exacerbated the differences in our teaching styles. Team teaching, Lynda wrote in her journal, seemed to make us "lose our own fragile bearing."

Sometimes Lynda would speak poetically, sometimes contemplatively, sometimes gleefully, with childlike silliness, and sometimes emphatically, with a matriarch's wisdom, but the subtext of whatever she said seemed to be, "I am here for you," "I believe in you," "If you fail, then I have failed you." When Janine would arrive to class 30 minutes late, Lynda didn't seem concerned or disappointed. "Oh, hello, lovey," Lynda would say, greeting her with a warm smile. In such moments I felt a sense of irritation, directed more toward Lynda than the students, that surprised me. Did Lynda believe, I wondered, that all students were always beyond reproach? My inclination, in response to the students' apathy, was to reinforce some boundaries and expectations that might make the class feel less stagnant and shapeless. But

I was reluctant to reveal a streak of authoritarianism Lynda wouldn't have suspected in me, and I couldn't bring myself to articulate my discomfort with Lynda's seemingly limitless permissiveness and compassion.

Perhaps the student who most encapsulated our struggles with the class—and with each other—was Stephen. Our efforts to draw him into class discussion seemed futile, and he would have his cell phone in hand, texting or playing online games, for most of the class. Beneath his baseball cap, the back portion of his brown hair was curled and dyed blond. Inevitably, about halfway through each period, Stephen would sleepily stand up, phone in hand, and depart for a 10-minute bathroom break.

When we brought the cart of laptop computers into the class for writing, he took advantage of the opportunity to shop for designer clothing and, on one occasion, search the Internet for photographs of cloned sheep. Stephen was never outwardly hostile toward his teachers or peers, but he defied school dress code by wearing shirts with the logos of alcoholic beverages, and he sometimes would opt out of class activities, quietly muttering, "This is bullshit." At the beginning of the year, Stephen rarely completed assignments. But Lynda made a special effort to chat with Stephen before and after class, asking him about his college visits. In one conversation with Lynda, Stephen confided that he hadn't read a single book cover-to-cover in his four years of high school, and Lynda celebrated his honesty.

One day, Lynda mentioned to me that Stephen had smiled and said hello to her in the hallway. That moment, to me, seemed a small victory, but Lynda was delighted. Over time, Stephen began to hand in his assignments more consistently, though the work still showed, from my point of view, minimal thought or effort. In a debriefing conversation, Lynda reflected, "I think Stephen is one who, had we not reached out, I'm not sure he would be coming with his little assignment every day. Even though we might be discouraged by the superficiality of what he's writing, he's made some commitment to something."

Responding to a short personal essay that he wrote for the class, Lynda complimented Stephen lavishly. "Now you are really rocking, Mr. Stephen," she wrote. "I am loving the voice that comes through in this piece." And she went on to write a full paragraph of effusive praise, citing phrases from Stephen's piece and the images and feelings they evoked in her. I enjoyed reading Stephen's essay: it showed signs of a playful engagement in the writing that we hadn't seen from him before. But Lynda's generous comments, I thought, went too far for a piece of writing that, to me, continued to highlight Stephen's laziness.

“It’s only about half as long as it should be,” I told Lynda. “And it’s missing punctuation and capitalization and doesn’t look like it’s been proofread at all.”

“I guess for me the length isn’t what I’m looking at,” Lynda replied. Lynda looked at me strangely, and I suspected that she wondered how her seemingly open-minded colleague had been transformed into an SAT grading robot. I didn’t value length for length’s sake, either, but I felt that such high praise should be reserved for students who showed a more sustained engagement in the assignment rather than submitting the minimum to get by.

“Your comments,” I said to Lynda, “always feel like a warm blanket wrapping around the students, and that way of commenting definitely has value, but sometimes I think I’d like my comments to feel more like an electric shock, shocking the student into an awareness of something.” When I saw the hurt and confusion in Lynda’s face, I felt that I had, in that instant, severed, or at least damaged, the vital bond that had formed between us when I met Lynda more than five years earlier.

## **II: Learning the Art of Catching Spitballs**

In her journal, as a way of navigating the tension between us, Lynda shared with me a story that defined her stance in forging relationships with her students. Some 40 years before my first year of teaching, a 23-year-old Lynda arrived at a different school, Emerson Junior High, to begin her teaching career. After a violent, racially charged incident at the end of the previous school year, police officers had been assigned to walk the school corridors. Inside the classroom, Lynda felt invisible and alone; she struggled to connect with the students or to command authority. One morning, while Lynda was monitoring study hall in the library, a spitball came flying through the air, altering the trajectory of her career:

As I pass a group of young black women, they begin to laugh. I don’t turn back; I just keep walking and then I feel something hit my back. A spitball falls to the floor. I pick it up and look back at the girls for a moment. They all look down at the table. I throw away the spitball and keep walking, making my way around the library. Finally, I approach the same group of young women again. I feel vulnerable, but I walk past them in spite of my uncertainty. They explode with laughter again. Another spitball hits my back. Immediately, I can hear the girls grow silent behind me. This time I do not turn around; I just keep walking with my fingers curled around the spitball. Something in me understands their suspicion and anger. Staying quiet during my encounter with the young women in the library was my first lesson in grace and its power to create relationships with students.

Perhaps in that moment, I learned the art of catching spitballs and, more importantly, the power of yielding to shared experiences with our students in which we try to understand them in spite of their missteps and failures rather than ones in which we assert our authority and judgment over them. While my current students are not throwing spitballs at me, they appear in my classes, unbalanced, stumbling in all kinds of ways. My practice is to try my best to see beyond their limitations and to try to understand their complexities in an effort to create a relationship where they are valued not for their predictable, easily sized up selves but for the unpredictable spark I might catch a glimpse of if I am truly paying attention. For some students, that spark needs a witness in order for it to endure the fray of “spitballs.” A teacher can be that witness—a mooring for that hidden spark.

In our frequent conversations in the years prior to the team teaching experiment, Lynda and I often shared stories from our teaching—moments that inspired us and made us feel hopeful about forming a community of creative thinkers in our classes. We less often had the occasion to discuss stories about moments of rupture in our teaching, about how we reacted in the face of crises that tested our ideals. At Emerson Junior High, a moment of empathy allowed Lynda to lay the groundwork for forming a relationship with the students instead of establishing herself as an adversary. The experience shaped a path forward for Lynda’s teaching—a desire to displace the teacher’s authoritarian status and replace it with a connection established out of honesty and trust.

Lynda was, undoubtedly, a great teacher, more than deserving of her legendary reputation, though not exactly in the way that I previously had imagined. Lynda had the gift of making herself fully present to meet the emotional and intellectual needs of anyone around her. Many students loved her not so much because she was an inspiring literature teacher, which was just one of the identities she could gracefully wear, but because she was always there to listen and affirm them and make them feel, in the tumultuous years of adolescence, more confident in themselves, more capable of embracing latent possibilities. When students threw a spitball, Lynda saw that act as emanating from some hurt or insecurity that they carried, and she almost invariably refrained from throwing the spitball back. While Lynda believed deeply in the transformative and transactional powers of literature, the conviction in which she was most unyielding was her commitment to the dignity of every human being.

When I asked Lynda to define “grace,” she described it as “something to do with actually seeing another human being.” The challenge of how we might bring grace to our teaching, Lynda proposed, “is related to the ques-

tion of how we dignify the students, first and foremost as human beings.” I found myself empathizing with the 23-year-old Lynda in the story: I pictured myself making rounds through the library, feeling the spitball hit my back, turning around to face the students, hearing their laughter. Moved as I was by Lynda’s beautiful telling of the spitball story, I couldn’t see myself reacting in the same way. In the back of my mind, I wondered whether passive acquiescence to an act of aggression was the only route to forging a trusting relationship. To make a conscious choice not to lash out against the spitball-hurler was an act of courage, but might confronting the students’ behavior in a respectful but pointed way, rather than remaining passive and silent, also represent a courageous stance? The spitball story was, however, instrumental in helping me to understand Lynda’s pedagogy and to raise some difficult questions about my own. How might I, in my own way, show more patience in catching spitballs and more persistence in seeing the hidden sparks within all students?

When teaching on my own, I tended to focus on creating an intellectual space in the classroom and empowering students to participate meaningfully within that space. Lynda described my method as an “invitation to the life of the mind.” But Lynda’s teaching reminded me of the value of seeking connections with students outside the academic frame of the class. In a discussion with Lynda, I questioned whether I was “leveraging my intellectual authority” with the students. I noted, “There is something maybe more universal about your approach in those connections that you’re building with the students as human beings, 100% on their own terms.” Even in a so-called student-centered class, where I rarely stood in the front of the room, and I tried to allow the contributions of the students to propel the discussion, I continued to position myself in a way that, albeit subtly, reinforced my authority. When I couldn’t succeed in inspiring students with my love of literature or in listening to them in a way that helped their own thoughts and passions take flight, I resorted to holding students accountable for failing to uphold their end of the student-teacher and reader-text relationships I thought should be sacrosanct. Lynda, on the other hand, kept catching the proverbial spitballs and looking for sparks.

I tried to search within myself to understand why I felt unsettled when Lynda had heaped unqualified praise on Stephen’s essay or warmly welcomed Janine despite her tardiness. I wanted to believe that I was upholding academic standards and challenging all students to do their best work. I began to suspect, though, that I was relying on the authority of my teacher persona to protect myself from revealing my own vulnerability. The graceful act of “actually seeing another human being” is related to the graceful act

of actually being present as a human being oneself, a self-revelation that, in a student-teacher relationship, immediately shifts the balance of power.

When students lack an intrinsic curiosity in the subject matter of the course, Lynda and I began to discuss, how do the teacher's role and responsibilities shift? In such scenarios, Lynda suggested, we should strive to transcend rather than solidify the academic foundation of the class: "When someone like Stephen for whatever reason right now in his life isn't able to give up whatever he's built up around himself to enter an intellectual space, what do we do as teachers?" Lynda asked. "What does a teacher even mean? What does a classroom even mean to someone like Stephen?" When a class wasn't engaging students personally, intellectually or imaginatively, Lynda felt, a teacher had the responsibility to continue reaching out to all students in pursuit of their inner spark, even if the institutional structures of the classroom had to be dismantled in the process.

On the day of our Contemporary Fiction end-of-semester exam, when Stephen approached me to hand in a half-complete essay, I praised the energy and freshness of his descriptive language. I urged him to write more. I was surprised to see Stephen nod, return to his desk, and continue writing.

Months later, Lynda, who witnessed my interaction with Stephen from the corner of the room, lingered over the moment in an email to me. She wrote, "I learned so much from you in that moment. You did not back down; you kept Stephen engaged at the Chrome cart, inviting him to go back to his desk to write more, to think more. He was reluctant, but you saw something beyond that reluctance. Finally, Stephen took back the laptop, returned to his desk, and wrote more thoughtfully and intelligently." Lynda questioned whether she herself would have intervened: "I remember saying to you, 'I am not sure I would have had the courage to persist.' You did, however, and gave to Stephen a remarkable gift." Graceful as always, Lynda this time had seen a hidden spark in me.

### **Coda: Seeking Grace**

On a Friday evening in December, Lynda and I drove down to New York to see Anna Deavere Smith's play, *Notes from the Field*, at the Second Stage Theater. We hoped that the performance would offer a reprieve from the labor of team teaching and from the accumulated mass of notes from our own field—the journal entries, dialogue transcripts, and reconstructed scenes that I had been sifting through as I tried to make meaning of our work.

In the play, a virtuoso solo performance, Smith portrays dozens of characters, whose words are assembled from the transcripts of Smith's own



interviews. Juxtaposed with video clips of police brutality and the musical accompaniment of a lone bass player, the interviews call into question the impact of racial bias in the interlocking systems of education and incarceration in the United States. As I watched the gifted Smith transform herself from preacher to teacher to prison guard, I imagined that she might next appear as Lynda, recalling the spitball she had caught at Emerson Junior High School 45 years earlier. So much of Smith's play seemed to be about what Lynda describes as grace—moments where grace becomes unexpectedly present, where it is startlingly absent, where it remains frustratingly elusive.

The educational philosopher Maxine Greene, to whom *Notes from the Field* is dedicated, writes that imagination is vital because it makes empathy possible. Through imagination, Greene suggests, schools might become sites of liberation rather than imprisonment. Smith's performance was a dazzling display of imagination in its most empathetic form—a generous kind of listening that opens pathways for connection and creation. Lynda's teaching was defined by this type of empathy. Like Smith's creative listening, Lynda's ability to see the spark of possibility in each student—to see students as other than their “predictably, easily-sized up selves”—depended not only on attentiveness but also on imagination.

Lynda's vision of redesigning the classroom doorway as the cover of a book now seemed prophetic. Over the summer, I had been thinking about engaging students in some form of literary experience, about the fictions we might read, write, and discuss. For Lynda, though, the core text of the course was always the students themselves, and what they carried with them, or hid, or left behind as they crossed the threshold into the classroom. To “read” that doorway as a book—with the fullest attention and most expansive imagination possible—was the approach that distinguished Lynda's rare and beautiful teaching.

As of that December evening, I still couldn't explain all the feelings that came out of my work with Lynda—the exhaustion, the exhilaration, the sense of loss, the pangs of jealousy, the humor that sustained us through indignation. What I did know, sitting next to Lynda in the theater, was that I believed in teaching as a graceful art, a giving and receiving of gifts, and that often these gifts crystallize most palpably through narrative, the stories we dare to speak, hear, and embody.

## Notes

1. I am using Lynda's real name with her permission. The student names are pseudonyms. Emerson Junior High School, the site of Lynda's spitball story, is also a pseudonym.

2. In my attempt to portray Lynda's singular voice, I have relied on multiple sources. The conversation about the classroom doorway and the dialogue about Lynda's comments on Stephen's essay are reconstructed from memory. For the other snippets of reflective conversation, I quote verbatim from two debriefing sessions with Lynda that I recorded and transcribed. I also draw liberally on quotations from Lynda's journal, which she shared with me regularly during our first three months of team teaching. When quoting from Lynda's journal, I indicate the source in the text. For Lynda's account of my interaction with Stephen during the Contemporary Fiction exam, I quote from an email exchange I had with Lynda after she read an earlier draft of this narrative in the summer after our team-teaching experience.



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