

Voices

The Teacher

GRETCHEN SCHWARZ

Do I Dare Disturb the Universe?

End of May. End of the school year . . .

A harassed senior in German II, worried about her English class, asked me what I knew about T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." What did I know? At that point, I *was* Prufrock! A loser if ever there was one! School's closing seemed harder every year, students becoming restless and resistant earlier, depressed and overloaded teachers checking out every VCR in the building to pass time with minimum conflict. The last set of tests in German One were awful. I would have had more success instructing the desks. And I was so tired . . .

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .

What about my professional status in general? After observing a pilot program of computer use in a foreign language classroom in the fall, I had insisted that the cooperative learning model the teacher had used was essential. Otherwise, with no change in teaching methodology, the computer would be nothing but a very expensive machine for grammar drills. Well, computers were definitely coming to each foreign language classroom the next year. Training in cooperative learning was strictly optional. So much for my suggestion. Moreover, in four years, I had had no other input on school programs or policies, no say on staff development, and no way to influence teacher evaluation . . .

*And when I am formulated, sprawling
on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days
and ways?
And how should I presume?*

Finally, I had resigned—maybe never to return to the high school

classroom. Drum roll? An award? Regrets from the district? Praise from the principal? Nope. I received a "termination packet" to fill out, including one page to sign, swearing I had read all the other pages . . .

*I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.*

Poor Prufrock had lost the vision—the purpose, so that he could mourn, "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each./ I do not think that they will sing to me." And me? Had I nothing left but disillusionment and disappointment? It surely hadn't turned out like *To Sir, With Love* or *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*. But I did have the memory of a mother telling me earlier that spring that her son, no star pupil, was actually interested in his research paper. And I had a recent letter from a former student, a state away, from whom I had not heard in seven years. She had proudly finished college with a degree in English and German—like me. And I recalled the thrill when an ornery boy, a nonreader, told me how much he liked *The Old Man and the Sea*, which we were studying. And I had final class evaluations (in decipherable German!) in which one student said

she always felt free to say what she really thought, and another had said the class was about more than German—it was about life.

Oh, I am no charismatic classroom superstar, like Prufrock, "I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be." But the mutual respect and affection, the humor and the honesty, and the earnest search for human meaning that one can share with students in the classroom (and with colleagues in the lounge) are great gifts, gifts that can elevate us all.

And would it have been worth it, after all

Would it have been worth while . . .

After endless bookkeeping and politics, my failures and very public faults, the humiliations, frustrations, and exhaustion? In the face of what Henry Giroux calls "the proletarianization of teacher work; that is, the tendency to reduce teachers to status of specialized technicians within the school bureaucracy, whose function then becomes one of managing and implementing . . ." (1988, p. 122)? Yes! We teachers may not make the world safe for literacy; we may not wholly transform society—but we can, unlike Prufrock, dare to disturb the universe. We can make a difference still. □

References

- Eliot, T.S. (1970). *Collected Poems 1909-1962*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., pp. 1-7.
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