Letter from the President

Sue Curry
University of New Hampshire

Follow this and additional works at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj

Recommended Citation
Curry, Sue (2019) "Letter from the President," New England Classical Journal: Vol. 46 : Iss. 1 , 123-126. Available at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj/vol46/iss1/16

This Message from the President is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.
Let ter from
the pre si dent

Dear Members of CANE:

When things do not happen in threes, as the saying goes, they seem to happen en masse.

In the autumn of 2018, I was rather too aware of the struggles, illnesses, and losses with which so many family, friends, and acquaintances had been endeavoring to cope. But now, in the spring of 2019, while disturbing news of the wider world continues apace, closer to home the theme that keeps emerging is that of unexpected moments of attention and care that change the whole course of a life. And the common thread running through these stories that seem to be collecting into a low-key Woodstock or Lollapalooza of my mind is teaching.

In meetings, I hear of lives set on a never-before-considered path because of a teacher who noticed them, intuited a talent and need for a bit of a nudge, and set them on a course that they are living out to this day. These are not my stories to tell, but here are a couple of other examples.

I like to read during my commute every day (full disclosure: I take the bus). Recently, I have been reading A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women: Essays on Art, Sex, and the Mind by the writer, Siri Hustvedt (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016). Lots of heady stuff about the brain. Very good. But it is an essay describing her experience teaching writing at the Payne Whitney Clinic in New York to psychiatric inpatients that set off that musical festival in my own mind again. Hustvedt tells the story of one of her students whose response to a writing assignment she very much admired. “Afterward,” she writes, “I spoke to the student in the hallway and asked him if he had ever thought of becoming a writer. He looked a little surprised. We chatted a bit
about books. He was released, and I didn’t see him again.”

Hardly a moment worthy of recreating for the Hallmark Channel (does that still exist?). But, as Iris Murdoch noted, it is much harder to create interesting good characters than fascinating bad ones.

Nonetheless, five years later, “after I had stopped my work at the hospital,” Hustvedt continues, “I received a package in the mail, opened it, and found a book inside: Street Freak: Money and Madness at Lehman Brothers by Jared Dillian. I opened the volume and read the dedication the writer had scrawled on the title page: ‘To Siri – Thank you for saving my life and helping me to become a writer. Jared’” (115).

Which just goes to show, you never know.

You never know where a rather insignificant-sounding conversation, an impulsive compliment, a kind gesture that demonstrates to someone who didn’t even know they were in need of it that they are seen, are heard, exist, will lead.

A brief moment between an established writer/teacher and a young man in the hospital being treated for bipolar illness can change two lives and through their work many, many more. You never know. One can in no way describe that moment as a relationship in the traditional sense of student and teacher or mentor and mentee, and yet...you just never know.

And, because I am a bit slow, it wasn’t until several days later that I remembered my own story: when I was in high school and struggling, it was my high school Latin teacher that literally saved my life.

I am not nearly as generous as the people around me when it comes to sharing my own story nor is it especially interesting, but it is also not hyperbole that I am employing for rhetorical effect here (hail, Cicero!) simply to make a point. The person who saw me, heard me, and seemed to recognize my existence and my difficulty was my high school Latin teacher. I liked her, but did not feel especially close...you just never know.

And I most definitely did not set out to become a Latin teacher in turn, but here I am.

You just never know.
So, what is Curry rambling on about all this for? Because I am thinking about how much Good there is in so much of what you do that goes unacknowledged and that it is an insult to be asked to quantify or to find a way of fitting into a superficial evaluation system. I am thinking about the potential for Good that exists within all of your classrooms. I am thinking about simple moments between student and teacher that can change the course of a life and for which there will never be a box (please gods, no!) in which to describe them for purposes of promotion, in part because you are unlikely to even know they have occurred and, if you do find out, that knowledge may not come until many years later, and, most importantly, because it really isn't anybody else's business.

And these moments are also very hard to describe in words, if they ever even come to an individual's awareness. I know with all of my being that my Latin teacher saved my life, but I forget. How can I forget something like that? Well, life goes on and you think of other things and you do. You forget. You can't find the words ever or anymore, you forget, but the moment occurred and a life was transformed.

To steal from Leonard Cohen, there is magic afoot in your classrooms, or at least the potential for magic and I would bet that many of you do not even know how much Good you have done. Perhaps the recipients of that Good are, too, unaware, and yet their lives have been transformed.

So, in this season of rebirth and growth, I want to celebrate and thank you for all the intangible Good you do. How do you explain such moments to school boards, deans, and university presidents who want to cut Latin programs and shrink Classics departments? How can the intangible Good you do be called as witness to the value of your work now so carefully measured in test scores, student evaluations, enrollments, and retention? (I am not an expert on Plato, but I don't recall a precise system of measurement for the Platonic Good.) I do not know. But that doesn't mean these moments don't exist. And it doesn't mean that they aren't the absolutely most important thing you do, no matter who knows it.
I know all kinds of teachers transform lives, but it seems I keep hearing about *Latin* teachers transforming lives.

Thank you, E. Scott, for saving mine.

And, thank you, for all the intangible Good you do.

In the face of threats to close programs, to shrink departments, to implement new and more quantitative systems of evaluation that will never be able to “measure” all the growth that can and does occur within the classroom, keep the magic afoot.

Sue Curry, CANE President
Senior Lecturer in Classics
University of New Hampshire
Susan.Curry@unh.edu