

Taylor Tessitore

Essay 1

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Flip of the Switch

Stories are what make us who we are. Until the end of tenth grade, becoming an anthropologist was all I could think about. Why? Because our history, and the history of all the people of the world, is one big story. I was enthralled with everything about cultures and people, wanting nothing more than to study how history has shaped what we know today. But the assignment we were given for tenth grade summer reading threw a little wrench into my plans. My class was asked to read a piece of classic literature and write an essay on how the topic is still pertinent in today's society and why it was important to me. Being an avid reader, I chose what I thought would be the most challenging book: *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck. Imagine my surprise when I finished the book and found myself at a loss as to what to write. This assignment reflected the basics of anthropology, yet I couldn't come up with a way to write it down. My tenth grade teacher, a woman notorious for lost papers and classroom disarray, had in no way prepared us for the challenges we were going to face in our last two years of high school. And suddenly, it was like a switch had been flipped. I never again wanted to be at a disadvantage because I didn't know how to express myself.

Tenth grade English was a joke, and everyone knew it was because of the teacher. She was scatter-brained, forgetful, and lost half of the work we turned in. Maybe this was because her son was in my grade, but she seemed more concerned with being a cool teacher than being an educator. This was at a point in my life when I had the same mindset as everyone else when it

came to English. We all thought that since we spoke and wrote English every day, we knew it well enough, so why did we have to take a class about it? I always got good grades on my essays, so the classes themselves seemed like a waste of time. Add in the fact that we didn't do much else besides read aloud to the class and you have yourself a big mess. With books like *Animal Farm* and *Of Mice and Men*, she had managed to turn our entire class into English haters in a matter of months, and it seemed like she didn't even have to try. We did nothing but read aloud, take quizzes, write essays, and repeat that same process endlessly. Teaching should be about incorporating new ideas and learning techniques, not doing the same thing every day, year after year. Times change rapidly, and it's important that we do too. But we had to give it our all because it was a fact that eleventh grade English was no cakewalk. With the regents looming at the end, everyone had no choice but to buckle down.

The teacher I had was as strict as strict could be. She would come off as condescending to me, as if she was so much smarter than all of us that it was a struggle for her to talk to us. Every day it was the same rigid structure of literature quizzes, then onto grammar lessons, then finally onto going over homework. No time for questions. No time for creativity. It wouldn't be fair to say that she was a bad teacher, because I learned so much that year. But she was one of the unconsciously competent people who were so naturally good at their subject that they had no idea how to teach it. And to be honest, I didn't think that was possible in English because almost everything seems subjective. And the subjects that weren't subjective (mechanics, grammar, syntax, etc.) were structured so much that they were unenjoyable as well. And by this time in our high school careers, we were wondering if there were any good English teachers for us out there. Compared to our fantastic social studies and science departments, the English teachers needed a serious boost in rankings. There had to be a happy medium between a complete airhead (for lack

of a better word), and an authoritative, no nonsense “Nazi,” as we called her. And then, with an angel in disguise, our prayers were answered.

Tom Clayton was and is *the* most fantastic man, English teacher, and mentor that has ever lived (in my opinion). No one expected that for our senior year, the year we finally got to slack off just a little, we would find that happy medium. Somehow, this man was able to make seniors want to come to school and learn. Maybe it was his grandfather-like appearance. He wasn't even that old, but he had the whitest hair and kindest smile. He would always be in his room, door wide open, for anyone to come talk about anything. He could listen to our problems and still remain impartial, and he would always encourage us to put it into writing. I don't recall a time all year when one of us didn't turn in an assignment. He had a way about him that we could not stand to disappoint him because he was that nice a guy. I also don't recall a time when he lost control of the class. He was such a great guide that we didn't want to go off topic. I use the word “guide” because, to me, he was more of a learning facilitator than teacher. We were always encouraged to take weird angles on the things we learned and express them however we wanted to. He was open to all types of creative mediums: painting, drawing, writing, speaking, even dance. No class was ever boring, and the discussions were always diverse, filled with great ideas that he let us find on our own. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is not an easy book to teach, especially to a group of students whose only concern is making it to graduation. But that has become one of my favorite novels because of the way he taught it, in such a way that kept us actively learning.

Mr. Clayton was also the one teacher who was able to instill a love of creative writing in me. I had never thought about writing a story before I took his creative writing elective, but as it turns out, I'm good at it. Now, every chance I get I'm scribbling down ideas for stories I could

write. And my favorite class so far in college has been the *Inside of a Dog* writing course with Kate Moses (whose teaching style happens to remind me a lot of Mr. Clayton's). I think the key contributing factor in this was that he let me read his own manuscript. He had compiled every breakthrough he had ever seen in his classroom all in this one book. Some of the stories were so endearing and heartfelt, it was impossible to feel unemotional while reading it. His words made me realize that I could be one of those people who inspire change like he had for over twenty-five years. I realize that teaching isn't always going to be epiphanies and instant gratification, but the possibility is enough for me. If I had been asked in tenth grade if I would ever want to write a book, I would have said, "No way." But I will write one someday; that is one of my biggest goals now. But what I never would have guessed was that I would be shy about reading the things I wrote *aloud* to my classmates.

Growing up in a small community, I got to know everyone in my grade on the very first day. I graduated with 52 students in my senior class, and we had all been together since I moved to Schoharie in sixth grade. So when it came to presenting and sharing, it was no big deal for us. But in Mr. Clayton's creative writing course, I would have thought we were thrown onto a New York City street and told to read a story for everyone. We thought we knew each other and their dirtiest secrets. But in a class where any topic or art form was acceptable, we were like strangers. When reading our works out loud, or performing them, each of us became a new person as we bared more of our souls. Creating an environment where students, in the most stressful time of their lives, feel comfortable enough to talk about their situations has to be one of the hardest things to achieve. That ability must be an acquired talent, because I know some teachers who have yet to learn it. Abuse, drugs, rape, neglect, death – it was all put on the table by my classmates. Because Mr. Clayton had created a safe zone for us, free from fear of repercussion

and judgement, no one held anything back. It was almost magical, the way his personality and teaching styles made students *want* to tell their stories. Maybe it was how easy-going he was, or maybe it was just his love of hearing our stories. That was the part of English he made me fall in love with: the explanations, and the reasons, and the stories that only English allows us to describe. The four main components of English – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – were all covered in his class, allowing us to tell and learn other peoples stories.

Not everyone is good at art, or music. But I truly believe that everyone has the potential to use these parts of English to express themselves in ways they never thought possible. So even if someone can't draw and has no sense of rhythm, everyone can write, discuss, and explain because of the tools our English teachers provide. It was Mr. Clayton who inspired me to be an English teacher so I could possibly rekindle a love for English in students, just as he did for me. I chose high school education because the years spent in high school are when young adults are still trying to figure themselves out. So, being a high school teacher, I would catch them at a time when I could have the most impact. The years before seventh grade are about learning the fundamentals, which I enjoy, but it's not where my passions lie.

For example, I want to challenge students to appreciate Shakespearean literature, but I also want self-expression to come as naturally as breathing to them. Just because I am somewhat good at English doesn't necessarily mean I will have the ability to teach it, in the same way my eleventh grade teacher fell short. It is important to learn the structure of the English language, and learn them well. But to do so without inspiring an appreciation for it is barely worth teaching at all. I want to be an arbiter, or facilitator, of active learning, in an environment where students are more interested in knowing the content than worrying about the results of an exam. Teaching today, in my opinion, is too exam/grade focused, especially when it comes to common core and

standardized testing. I don't want to be one of those teachers who teaches to the test. It is my hope that I will teach to give my students the knowledge they can use whenever they need it in their future endeavors.