

The Teacher Who Changed My Life

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I could see the ivy grow from where I sat. And I'd stare at it, while its colors changed with the seasons' passing, while we thought about *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, the theory of the dialectic, and, in retrospect, while we thought about our own lives and our place in the world.

Professor Bill Morse was my instructor for a seminar in John Milton during the first semester of my sophomore year at Holy Cross. Truth be told, I had no business in the upper-level class, and my presence there was largely due to a registrar mishap, but for some reason, Bill let me stay. I cringed that first day when he told us to arrange our chairs in a circle. You can't hide in a circle. And as I looked around for someone who lived in my dorm, I quickly realized I was outranked here. The fact that I was allowed to stay, despite the ranking, inspired me. Perhaps Bill saw something in me during those first few classes. Or perhaps he noticed all the Post-it notes and hi-lighting I had done in my Milton handbook and feared what I would do if he didn't let me stay. Regardless, his confidence in me was inspiring. I spent most of my days preparing for that weekly seminar. I read the assigned reading. I read the suggested reading. I read supporting texts and notable opinions. And then I began to form my own. I was the first to enter the circle each week and the last to leave it.

My friends dreaded dinners in Kimball dining hall with me that year, because I would often ask them what they thought of the fall of Eve and what it meant to them when she crouched by the river's edge to see her own reflection. I asked them if they thought the theory of the dialectic could be applied to our own trivial lives, and if they felt more passionate about life when they thought about it within the context of dying. These questions proved to be table-clearing topics, and it's quite surprising that I ended that semester with any friends at all. But I couldn't contain my enthusiasm. Professor Morse had triggered something in me. He had ignited an independence of thought that I hadn't yet found in myself.

Those circular discussions hinged on class participation. They demanded that you had completed the assigned reading and that you had thought critically about the text. These requirements can be intimidating. And forming opinions articulately in the midst of a circle of academically decorated upperclassmen is scary. But Morse had an ease about him. He was clearly engaged with the text, and he readily transferred that engagement to his students. And his easy presence gave you the confidence you needed to feel as if you belonged there. And the conviction that your opinions had merit, as long as you could support them within a well-structured argument. The verbal confidence I was developing transferred readily to my writing, molded by Morse's encouragement to think beyond the thoughts of the writers of the texts we read. I still believe that the papers I submitted that year were some of the best I had written during my entire tenure at Holy Cross. And now, as a professional writer and editor, I still occasionally reread those drafts, to remind myself what it means to think critically and to write well. And how good writing often comes easily when you're thoroughly engaged in the subject matter.

At the end of that semester. I approached Morse and asked him if he'd consider teaching a Milton tutorial with another student and myself. We were fascinated by Milton's theory of the dialectic, and we gave Morse an outline of a year's worth of curriculum that we hoped to study. He hesitated for a second, probably because our enthusiasm was mildly frightening, but he quickly accepted our challenge, and we spent the next year together discussing Milton's prose.

Those discussions shaped some of my most memorable times on Mount Saint James. Professor Morse made me think critically, speak coherently, write concisely, and, in the midst of all that, he made me a better person. He was patient when we lacked complete understanding, and I quickly learned that he didn't expect us to think like Milton scholars though he treated us with a kind of respect that made us feel as if we could be what he did demand of us was that we demonstrated, each week, that we had considered the text we read. That we had spent time with it. That we had thought about it not only within the confines of the page it was written on, but that we had considered its place in the world. In essence, Professor Morse taught me to think.

I didn't realize it at the time, but I have since come to appreciate that I wasn't simply studying Milton that year, I was gaining an appreciation for how to live. Morse was showing us how to think purposefully and to have the confidence to share those thoughts. He taught us that though we may encounter others whose opinions we don't always understand or espouse, we need to respect the validity of those opinions and accept that they have a place in our world.

I can still see the ivy that grew on the cold brick building that contained my Milton seminar. And while it's true that I've left the confines of those walls, I've held onto one of the lessons Professor Morse taught there. Holy Cross asks each incoming freshman class a question. During the fall of 1996, the question posed to my class was, "How Then Shall We

Live?” Eight years later, I realize that Professor Morse spent much of his time in the classroom helping us answer that question.

How Then Shall We Live?

Take critical note of your surroundings, and, then, after some time has elapsed, have the courage to come back to yourself, in order to live well, and thoughtfully, within them.