

Remembering Mike Rose

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“Remembering Mike Rose” recalls 40+ years of friendship and collaboration.

Mike Rose is gone, and what a loss it is—not only to his many friends and colleagues, but to the profession and to generations of teachers and students whose work was (and will continue to be) informed by his presence. Mike’s great contribution to our thinking about teaching and learning was his remarkably deep and generous attention to detail. He wrote from the inside; he wrote about people and places; and he wrote about what mattered. He was tireless and meticulous in his field work. He would engage the “literature” and the issues of the moment, but always as points of reference, not as subjects, and primarily to explain or ground or illuminate the lived moments that made his writing so memorable and so persuasive.

Mike Rose could wander in and out of your life, but when he was there, you knew it and it made a difference. Things slowed down. The conversation sparked. You saw and understood the world differently. He was a master teacher. For me, he was a writer’s writer, and I will miss him dearly.

I am trying to remember when and where I first met Mike. It must have been the early 80s, before he began working toward the final drafts of *Lives on the Boundary* (published in 1989). I’m sure we must have met at the CCCCs, and I suspect the meeting was brokered by our mutual friend, Joan Feinberg of (then) Bedford Books. After that, there was a group of friends, including Mike and Joan, who began to gather regularly for a long dinner at the annual meeting.

Mike had read my essay, “The Study of Error” (published in 1980) and we had begun a long-distance conversation (mostly letters!) about what was then called “Basic Writing,” courses designed for students whose entry into the academy as readers and writers was fraught and difficult, marked by struggle. We didn’t even have to warm up to each other. It seemed like we had been having this conversation for years. The talk was easy and animated and loving and fun. We were on the same page. Our professional lives took us this way and that, but we insisted on staying on the same page, even when we weren’t.

Around this time, Mike invited me to provide an essay for his edited collection, *When a Writer Can’t Write: Studies in Writer’s Block and other*

Composing Problems (1985). At this point, I could properly have been called a “cognitivist.” (“The Study of Error” used methods drawn from cognitivist work on math and second language learning.) I had just received promotion and tenure, and I had applied for and won a Fulbright Lectureship to teach American literature at the Universidad de Deusto in Bilbao, Spain. I carried notes and books with me on the move to Bilbao, and I had a knapsack filled with 500 student responses to our placement exam. These were to provide the subject matter for my essay, which ended up with the title, “Inventing the University.”

The books, on the other hand, were part of a sabbatical project to read my way through the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. I hadn’t planned to bring them to the essay I was preparing for Mike, but in the end I wrote a very different kind of essay than the one I had proposed for the volume. It began with an epigraph from Foucault’s “Discourse on Language”:

Education may well be, as of right, the instrument whereby every individual, in a society like our own, can gain access to any kind of discourse. But we well know that in its distribution, in what it permits and in what it prevents, it follows the well-trodden battlelines of social conflict. Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it (227).

Mike was looking for an essay from a cognitivist. I sent him something very different, and he wrote to say, “Whoa. What’s up?”

I think my essay came in late; I was out of the country and out of the loop, and what I wrote seemed to have little to do with the core concerns of the volume. I didn’t set out to be different, but by the time I wrote the essay I was thinking differently. I can remember the pleasure and the energy I found in the essay once I started to work on it. And so I did what we all do in such a situation; I sent what I had.

I think Mike was initially a little flummoxed. It was a big jump from mental blocks to the prison house of language! I know that we wrote back and forth about the essay. Whatever dissonance I had created, however, couldn’t be revised away. It was just a question of whether he wanted the essay in the collection or not. Mike was, as he always was, open and generous and curious and thoughtful. I know that he was interested in what I was doing and saw its importance—and so, in the end, my essay was part of his collection.

Soon after, Mike invited me to read drafts of *Lives on the Boundary*. We wrote back and forth regularly for about a year. Like many writers, the

closer Mike got to finishing his book, the more nervous he became. This book was, he knew, his launching point, and he was telling a story that cut close to the bone. Mike was a worrier by nature, and the thought of finishing, of handing his book over to others, became almost paralyzing. He was a charmer, but he was also a gifted and serious writer, and he needed to believe that readers could (and would) not just admire the book but receive his gift, acknowledge the work, understand who he was and what he had accomplished as a writer and a scholar. This was Mike's signature writing block.

He had become stuck while fussing with the Introduction, and he asked me for advice. I suggested moving some paragraphs around, burying his lead a bit, slowing things down, inviting his readers in. It seemed to help. The book of course was an enormous success, and a great achievement, and this all had nothing to do with me. Mike would often remind me, though, that my close reading of his work helped to keep him going at the end, when he was spinning his wheels and losing momentum. This was also typical of Mike—to pass on to others credit that was rightly his own.

At the time of his death, we were again in close contact. Each of us was finishing a book. I was beginning to read his new manuscript. He had just finished reading mine. We were both feeling nervous, and we were both looking for one more trusted and sympathetic reader, someone who might acknowledge that what we were doing still mattered. My book, *Like What we Imagine: Writing and the University*, is now in print. At the time of his death, Mike was still working with his agent to find a publisher for his memoir. It had the tentative title, *When the Light Goes On*. Both of our books were, in a sense, a return to beginnings. Mike was writing again about his childhood and his family and about his high school English teacher, Jack McFarland, a key figure in *Lives on the Boundary*. My book is a kind of professional memoir. Two of the chapters speak directly to my last year of teaching at the University of Pittsburgh. An opening chapter is set during my freshman year at Ohio Wesleyan.

I had submitted one of these essays (titled, "Back to Basics") to the *Journal of Basic Writing*. (I had published with *JBW* at the beginning of my career, and I had hoped to publish with them one last time at the end.) The editors sent a copy to Mike for review. Mike sent me a note to let me know that he was reading it. And he added, as he usually did, a detailed critique that went well beyond (and that spoke to me much more frankly than) the letter he had sent to the journal.

He concluded with a note:

I am finishing up a book, and the conclusion is kicking my ass. (Conclusions for all my books have done so.) I find myself thinking of me and you sitting on the deck of the Crab Shell bar overlooking the Pacific when you told me to reverse the position of the two opening paragraphs in the preface of *Lives on the Boundary*. . . . and friggen' bingo, the thing just popped. Not a praying man, I'm praying for one of those Ah-Ha moments.

I offered to help. He sent me the "Preface" and a link to a brief essay in *The Hedgehog Review*, "The Desk," which I assumed was part of the new book, perhaps part of the conclusion that had stymied him. He said,

You asked about the Heartbreaking-Work-of-Staggering-Genius that has consumed the last five years of my life. . . . I am going to send you the preface. It'll give you an overview. It begins with a deep dive into the Senior English class that saved my life, but isn't a rehash of *Lives on the Boundary*. I really tried to figure out exactly what the hell happened over that nine months in my late adolescence, and was fortunate to have my teacher explore it with me. . . . from there you'll see what else I did. I hope you like it.

As far as I know, this book is still unpublished, and so I thought it might be appropriate to provide a brief summary, something to keep the book and its possibilities alive and in circulation.

Mike's "Preface" is a straightforward summary of the book's origin and its chapters. The premise for the book is this: Mike goes back to his old neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles, and he sits down again with Jack McFarland, the teacher who changed the course of his life. They reread the books on the old syllabus, they look over Mike's papers, and then they look again, and they talk about teaching and learning, about what they've learned in the classroom and from each other over time.

As a context to this encounter between a student and his teacher, Mike visited schools and talked with other teachers and other students. Over a five-year period, he interviewed one hundred people in all: "They ranged from high schoolers to sixty and seventy year olds, people who grew up in well-to-do neighborhoods and people who grew up in neighborhoods like mine—in a few cases *in* my old neighborhood." And the Preface concludes:

The deep dive into my life-changing year in Senior English and the similarly transformative experiences of a wide range of other people afford a picture of education at its vibrant best, those times when the mind stirs and schooling is infused with purpose. The composite pic-

ture leads us to think about education in ways that are dramatically different from the mainstream policy narrative about schools that has dominated American culture for a generation. Chapter Eight (“Education for a Meaningful Life”) draws from all the book’s cases to offer a fresh take on teaching, learning, and motivation, on intelligence and achievement, on the structure of school, and on the goals of education itself. Our bloodless policy talk is reinvigorated with a language of intellectual pleasure, human connection, and the desire for a meaningful life.

“The Desk,” on the other hand, is a memory piece with the subtitle: “How the imagination kept the unthinkable at bay.” It is a boy’s level account of pinched circumstances: a father who is seriously ill, a mother who heads out each day to work as a waitress, an old, empty and somewhat ramshackle house, a lone child. During the day, the boy’s imagination turned the ordinary into theaters of fantasy. We shared a number of reference points: our first desk, Sargent Bilko, Buck Rogers, Space Patrol.

I said:

What a pleasure!—a complicated one, to be sure, but those are the ones that make you say *Wow*. You think you are entering a sentimental account of childhood and childhood’s spaces. But then you get: ‘As a little boy, there was the soft tunnel under blankets. Once I had the bed to myself, I’d burrow under the quilt imagining passageways to safe mystery.’ *Once I had the bed to myself?! As a subordinate clause??!!*

The desk, the cardboard boxes ask to be front and center, but what I couldn’t shake was the big bed in front of the front door, and your Dad in it, losing his leg. There is the boy and the boy’s world, and he’s trying to work it all out. And there is the writer, years later, also trying to work things out. You orchestrate this just brilliantly.

Mike’s response was:

Trying to bring the book I’ve been working on to market . . . has really been demoralizing, so to get a response like yours to this little piece makes my day and gets some wind back in my sails. You nailed it about the bed. Our house was tiny, so this big, motorized thing humming all day and night consumed everything. Shit, man, my poor father.

And then Mike was gone.

Mike was a remarkably productive, visible, and influential scholar. At a time when research was becoming more and more predictable, and when it was addressed to increasingly specialized audiences, Mike Rose provided the striking example of a scholar who could think beyond the expected and who had the ambition to write for the nation.

The evidence for this is in the startling, impressive, and completely unpredictable projects represented on the CV. He has also, however, shown a deep and selfless commitment to the support of teachers, to the support of local and national initiatives affecting the schools, to promoting and refining the uses of writing in American education, and to raising public awareness to the issues that matter in contemporary schooling. He had the ambition to address the broadest audience and he did it with great integrity and great success. Careful, innovative scholarship, attention to local programs and projects, public advocacy on behalf of students, teachers, and workers—this is a rare and distinctive combination, evidence of a person with a generous spirit and with commitments beyond his own career.

Mike helped to shape the public discourse and the public understanding of issues in contemporary education. For years, you could find him on the radio and TV bringing his careful, thoughtful, informed positions to a range of audiences. On several occasions, I heard Mike literally change the tone and pacing of a talk show, a public meeting, or a news broadcast. The room went from noisy to quiet; the talk became thoughtful, careful. It was like magic.

WORK CITED

Foucault, Michel. “Discourse of Language” *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. Pantheon, 1972.

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