

A Different Kind of Hunger

Thomas Newkirk

Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* came out a few years after Richard Rodriguez's elegiac memoir *Hunger of Memory* and can be viewed as a powerful response. While Rose is sharply critical of the failure of modern universities to teach the under-prepared, he demonstrated, through his own story, that this instruction can happen if there is a more personal and intimate attempt to demystify academic work.

Around 1990, we formed a reading group at University of New Hampshire and read together Richard Rodriguez's beautiful memoir *Hunger of Memory*. Rodriguez portrays himself as a Mexican-American version of the "scholarship boy" who was separated from the richness of his family culture but not really part of the mainstream academic world. The scholarship boy is stranded in a no-man's land, not really part of either world. There is a deep longing in *Hunger of Memory* for the warmth and closeness of the life Rodriguez has separated himself from, and could not retrieve—also an ambivalent feeling about the value of the trade he has made.

As we were discussing Rodriguez's book, someone asked what Mike Rose's take on *Hunger of Memory* would be. His own memoir, *Lives on the Boundary*, had just come out, and there were obvious parallels and clear differences. Mike, for example, was far less nostalgic about the life in LA he had left. Bob Connors, a member of our group, knew Mike and said, "Let's ask him." So he posed the question and by our next meeting Mike had responded.

As I recall, relying on my memory, Rose did not feel the alienation at the center of *Hunger of Memory* was inevitable. He believed that colleges and universities could be welcoming places, where there was at least the possibility of human connection and community. His own story was proof of that, the unforgettable portraits of his great teachers, like Dr. Ted Erlandson at Loyola:

He worked as a craftsman works, with particulars, and he shuttled back and forth continually between print and voice, making me breathe my prose, making me hear the language I generated in silence. . . . So Ted Erlandson's linguistic parenting felt just right: a modeling of grace until it slowly, slowly began to work itself into the way I shaped language. (Rose 55-56)

It can hardly get more intimate than that, Mike breathing his prose. It was exactly what he needed: explicit teaching that demystified academic expectations, modeling a form of precision that he found appealing, Mike's hunger was to enter this world as modeled for him by Erlandson and others.

Of course, big universities like University of California, Los Angeles rarely made this kind of teaching a high priority. Professors did not get tenure by working with underprepared students. The usual response to student difficulties has been to blame public schools for failing to prepare students—a form of complaint, Mike notes, that is as old as the modern university. Ambitious, smart but underprepared students, like Mike himself, often found themselves in huge, impersonal classes and suffering ego-shattering D's and F's when their high school skills were inadequate. Frequently, there was little effort, on the part of instructors, to unpack the skills or steps needed to be successful.

Mike, with his strong background in cognition, was so adept at this unpacking. Every assignment we give has a key verb that signifies a mental operation, often a complex and unfamiliar one. When we use terms like “analyze,” “evaluate,” and “discuss,” we point to key academic skills, but we often don't illustrate how they are done. Too often, there is the assumption that just naming the mental processes is enough. In fact, it can be difficult for those of us, so familiar with these moves, to decenter and take the point of view of the student—who when confronted with these demands often default to awkward summarization. Almost every mistake I have made as a teacher comes from this failure to explain a process. Mike challenged us all to demystify these processes, to break them down—to teach them rather than to assume them.

Yet even as he exposed the failings of the university, he was, in his way, a traditionalist and an optimist. He respected, even revered, the core values of critical thinking and close reading. They had been liberating for him and could be for those students who struggled. There could be a place at the table for them as well.

I had never been to Mike's office, never attended a class, never had a conversation with him (though he did graciously provide a blurb to one of my books). But I can picture his office with unruly plants, soft, worn easy chairs, maybe a couch with some stuffing coming out, and the smell of fresh coffee in the air. I can imagine his classes with spicy food on a center table, laughter, and gregarious talk—settling down to discussion and at some point full attention on a sentence, read aloud, maybe multiple times, the words inspected, maybe altered.

I may not have this right, but it's my image and I'm holding to it.

WORKS CITED

Rose, Michael. *Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles, and Achievements of America's Underprepared*. Free Press, 1989.

Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*. Bantam, 1983

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