

Mike Rose, the Rust Belt, and Me

Marjorie Stewart

A chance meeting with Mike Rose gave the author of this essay a chance to revisit his work to better understand her own. This serendipitous encounter focused on the love of story, on a mutual passion for helping underprepared students, and shared rust belt backgrounds. The layers of interconnecting narratives led to a lively conversation about what those commonalities meant to them as teachers. The essay offers serious reflection on the work of reading, writing, and teaching, and the importance of honoring those who have guided us through those activities.

I was in St. Louis Lambert International airport and heading home from CCCCs when my phone rang. It was my conference roommate telling me that I had left my keys at the hotel. After an initial moment of panic and a few false starts, we arrived at a plan: she would put the keys in a cab and send them my way. All I had to do was wait.

I am not a patient person. As I waited, I paced. As I paced, I noticed a familiar face at a gate near mine. It was Mike Rose. I was starstruck. Just days before I had hung onto every word of his exemplar acceptance speech. Needing something to do with my nervous energy, I scraped up the courage to approach him. He was open and friendly. “Call me Mike,” he said immediately. I told him my story to justify my twitchiness; he sympathized and followed the unfolding tale of the keys and the forthcoming cabbie with interest.

We talked about our Pennsylvania rust belt backgrounds. I had moved earlier that year to rural West Virginia from Pittsburgh; he was familiar with the area, as he was a native of Altoona. He seemed to have a special fondness for Pittsburgh, and I told him of my only Altoona experience – riding a train around the Horseshoe Curve when I was about ten years old. We shared how we both missed close families, close neighborhoods, and the sense of community from our hometowns. We talked about places like Detroit, Cleveland, and the rest of the rust. I told him how the West Virginia coal industry was going the way steel went in Pittsburgh – clinging to false hope, promising a comeback that could never be. He understood.

That day in the airport I told Mike how my students were almost universally appalled at that attitude in “I Just Wanna Be Average” yet didn’t recognize it in themselves. We talked about the importance of that story, of all stories, in connecting with students in the classroom. I shared the stories

of my students (largely underprepared, first generation, and low income) and the emotional burdens and revelations they brought to the classroom. He talked about teaching and writing stories. The airport concourse faded into the background as narrative theory came alive.

I had discovered Rose's work my first year of teaching and followed him religiously thereafter. I taught at a college where several first-year writing professors used his work and some even used the entirety of *Lives on the Boundary*. I had been skeptical at first – did students want to read about how the educational system had failed them?

I had never set foot in a composition classroom until I was teaching in one. I had placed out of composition as an undergraduate and had not taught during my Masters' program. Fortunately, the writing program administrator invited me to team teach one of her sections with her, so I saw immediately how students related to Rose and his stories. That experience began my emphasis on narrative in the reading and the writing that I continue to assign. I use "Blue Collar Brilliance" in our English 102 class, which focuses on research writing. My students all know people, often family members, with blue collar jobs and already have great respect for them. The essay helps them identify and articulate what they had already known: there is a specialized kind of intelligence behind all work, whether it is respected in our culture or not.

I wish I could remember all the stories Mike told me that day in the airport – stories that flashed both back and forwards from those we knew and loved. What I remember is his charm, his smile and quick laugh, and his grace in spending time with a nervous fangirl worrying about her keys. He was tired – he said so and it showed. He was looking forward to going home and unwinding – "Conferences," he said, "were becoming exhausting."

As the conversation lapsed into silence, my phone rang. The cabbie was at the airport with my keys. All I had to do was get out and back in through security, and then it would be time to board my plane. He wished me luck again and said how he had enjoyed the conversation. I waved a quick good-bye over my shoulder. Glancing back, I saw him sink back into his seat, watching me dash off.

I tell the story of my meeting with Mike Rose when I introduce his work to students. My students read and workshopped this essay in class. They read "Blue Collar Brilliance" and "I Just Wanna Be Average" at the same time, which, like all his stories, meant more to me after that interlude in St. Louis and now they mean even more after his death. Mike Rose was my first scholar hero and the only one whom I ever met. Even though that was our only in person encounter, I miss you, Mike.

Marjorie Stewart is professor of English at Glenville State University. Before Dr. Stewart arrived at Glenville, she taught composition and directed the writers' center at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. At GSU, she teaches first-year writing, concentrating on corequisite courses for students who are underprepared for college English. She also teaches journalism and creative nonfiction and sponsors the student newspaper, *The Phoenix*.

