

Mike Rose in This Hallway

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Mike Rose valued working-class, first-generation students' ways of knowing and life on the boundaries of academia's center stages. This narrative essay illustrates the temporal and spatial trajectories of such values, the ways that Rose's faith in them informs his work as a teacher, and writing program administrators.

I stake out the rooms where my conference presentations are scheduled. The arrangement of chairs, their relation to any podium or platform, offers me a sense of how things could play out. Even though spaces reserved for my panels typically look the same, I perform this ritual, conference after conference. These days, I find something reassuring in the room's familiarity. At the same time, I still too often imagine a crowd indifferent to what I've come to say. Picturing myself at the lectern in these moments, I wrestle with some vague feeling of isolation, work to summon instead whatever knowledge and experience I have that brings me here.

Years ago, I was returning from one of these musings when I ran into Mike Rose. Mike was backing himself out of the convention center's grand ballroom. "I came to check out where my talk is," he told me. He stood there in the doorway, door ajar against his shoulder. Behind his white, curly hair, I could see enough of the theater to anticipate his vast audience. "God," he said, "this room is so big." Although smiling, he looked unnerved. When I read this special issue's call for papers, I right away saw this image: Mike Rose in this hallway linked to countless corridors, channeling hundreds of participants, spilling them into adjacent rooms and out again into the streets of whatever city it was that convention had pulled us to; Mike Rose, feeling something like I'm feeling, here in this hallway.

As I begin drafting this essay, I've completed another Zoom session with one of my basic writing students. Each time we enter this space, the student is sitting in the same room. A bedpost stands at one corner of the frame; the walls look stark, tall. The student angles his camera in a way that situates him at the very bottom of my monitor, making the walls seem even larger. During the end of our first meeting, I could hear the battery alarm on his smoke detector. Eleven Zoom sessions later, the alarm still randomly pierces our conversations. I imagine that in some future session, I'll open my laptop to find his room on fire. When I share this concern with my student, he tells me he doesn't even hear the alarm any more. Because of health issues,

he cannot venture up any ladders; he is waiting for one of his parents to change the battery, as they've promised to do.

This student regularly schedules meetings with me to compensate for absences and to discuss his difficulties with coursework. Born and raised in this working-class steel town, he tells me again and again, "I'm confused." Plumbing his confusion, as Mike Rose would advise, the student and I come to agree he is not confused because he lacks knowledge (*Lives* 236); the assignments confuse him because he does have ways of knowing, ways that often conflict with what I assume to be givens. He brings to class his definitions of "revision," of "outline," of "proposal." They're not the same as mine. I bring up the etymology of "confuse," and we talk about ways his confusion helps me "bring to ruin" the tale I'd predetermined, the curriculum developed before he could even find his desk in our classroom. I indicate to him changes in phrasing I'm now making to our department's standard syllabus in light of his confusion, in light of *our* confusion. Weeks ago, I'd started to smile whenever he began sentences with "I'm confused"; now, when he tells me he's confused, he smiles too.

This student, Mike Rose, and me in this hallway: the space becomes center stage alongside what's supposed to be center stage—a course shell, lectern, scholarly publication. Mike helps us see what difficulties writers face because he centralizes this hallway, the "small stuff" that's never really small. "Of course, big things are important," he says, "curriculum, and pedagogy, and professional and political activities beyond the classroom." However, he also values "everyday signs of commitment"—"[t]he teacher who encourages a hesitant question; . . . who spends an extra five minutes in a conference; who checks in with a student who had difficulty with the last assignment" ("Mike"). He meets in hallways working-class and first-gen students and teachers like himself, like me and my student, and others marginalized in mainstream curricular narratives, makes hallways a center stage.

Here, we contest the "sense of isolation" that's too often "rooted in the books and lectures that surround us, the very language of the place" (Rose, *Lives* 174). We come to learn that what we desire as central to being is not "the mist and vapor of sleep"; we speak back to that "alien voice" that tells us we don't belong (174), open "big things" (Rose, "Mike") to our new phrasing (Rose, *An Open* 1). Our presence in this place changes this place, changes pasts, forges new futures, new ways of knowing and being, from center stage, here in this hallway. This hallway, this now, this nexus of walls and routes, lecterns and desk chairs, anticipation, affirmation, and doubt: this memory of Mike Rose melds with my student on a Zoom call, the smoke among ruins, the alarm that's not an alarm.

I remember Mike Rose in the hallway outside that convention's grand ballroom. I remember, too, that his keynote there highlighted findings from *The Mind at Work*, where he explains the complex thinking that goes into what might seem simple labor. He relayed these findings to a packed house, a room stuffed with teachers, graduate students, and administrators, at their field's premiere conference, center stage. I gave a talk too that day, and the student, not yet my student, was somewhere that day as well. Here, in this hallway, Mike Rose in the doorframe, we learn where.

WORKS CITED

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