

Mike Rose and the University of the People

Shirin Vossoughi and Manuel Espinoza

This reprinted blog offers a dialogue framed as “a siblings’ tribute to a giant” between Rose’s students.

Shirin: Thank you dear brother for having this conversation with me. When we were in grad school together at UCLA—you a few years ahead of me—you taught me that our real home is the university of the people. That felt grounding. Like the real university is the one that’s conjured when people engage in social dreaming and intellectual struggle toward the good, change-making work of the world. And: remember who you really work for. It’s an ethic I try to share with my students. I feel like Mike was an architect and caretaker of the university of the people. How do you think that came to be?

Manuel: Sis, I only know—or, think I know—an aspect of this. It’s like saying I know the sun when it falls differently upon each of us. Mike was loved. He also felt things like sorrow acutely. And, he had a gregarious and curious spirit. He was an artist, which meant that he liked to re-arrange things. What better to re-arrange than his life as best he could? All of this (and so much more I don’t know) came together to create the conditions for a poor child to become a loving man. His cause was that of the person half-heard and nearly-discarded.

Shirin: You and I and so many others across time and place are the inheritors of that love. A few years ago I had a conversation with Mike where I mentioned the learning humanities—a term I first heard from you. I said it in passing, but he stopped me and said, “Wait say that again.” He threw in some swear words as Mike often did. And then, “That’s what we’ve been up to!” I think a lot about how he modeled the humanistic and artful design and study of learning, in his research, writing, teaching and being. How do you see his work in relation to the idea of the learning humanities?

Manuel: I see it as an exemplar, sis. It is a way of trying to be truthful in this world, a way of creating beauty. For we not only have need of taking in, drinking in what is beautiful, we have an impulse to flood the world with beauty of our own manufacture. The learning humanities is a branch of the art and craft of writing, one that helps us create

portraits of becoming, which can be instructive and transcendent when labored over, when finely and attentively rendered.

Mike thought so highly of you, sis. What aspects of our dear mentor do you remember most vividly?

Shirin: The ways he moved through the world as a teacher stood so powerfully against and beyond systems of dehumanized learning. And, the ways he observed brought forward possibility. I remember the feeling of working to articulate a baby-idea in his presence at that round wooden table in his office, or sitting across from him in the red-lit Galley. He would close his eyes and nod as you spoke, taking it all in so he could get to the essence of what you were reaching for. He'd reflect it back like you were a bonafide writer and he was your most avid reader, and help you whittle and stretch and refine and sharpen until it sang. Then he'd call a few days later to tell you he was still thinking about a sentence or phrase from your piece. What a thing to hear as a young writer. I witnessed him do this many times, with my peers, and eventually with my own students when he'd graciously accept invitations to visit my classes.

And I remember the feeling of his handwritten No. 2 pencil feedback on our papers, a potent blend of no-bullshit affirmation for what was working and careful models for what could work better, and why. I often find myself channeling these ways of being with my students, reading their essays with keen interest, working to fade the boundaries between writing for school and writing for life. That kind of pedagogical care sows a loving responsibility for ongoing creation.

What do you remember most vividly brother?

Manuel: What I remember most was his loving kindness. A few years ago, a terrible thing happened to me. He picked me up off the mat, dusted me off, and walked alongside me, his hand on my shoulder as I regained my balance and came back among the living. His support, his encouragement, nursed me back to health, back to integrity. He was masterful at helping me learn how to become a sharper thinker, a more effective and elegant writer, a scholar with a flexible and fruitful process. The intellectual apprenticeship with Mike was life-altering, but what he taught me about being a human being, about being a man, held even greater significance. (To be certain, there were times when all of those things came together.) I was his student, his colleague, and, later on, his son. Engrafted—as another mentor of ours would say—made part of the living original by choice, with fatherly intent.

NOTE

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