

A Tribute to the Unknown Professor (or The Story of A Late Bloomer in Remedial Creative Writing)

When I was in my mid-20s, I began to incubate the philosophy that I had mismanaged at least nineteen-and-a-half years of my life. I had been going through life in a simple way—the sun comes up, and when it goes down, the moon comes up, and when that goes down, the sun comes up. I wasn't doing anything wrong—had no criminal record, had not broken the law—but I had no dream of anything. In school, my teachers said “William has a quiet way of not listening.” I failed out of Central High School, and at Germantown High, I just sat there day-dreaming. I tried Benjamin Franklin Night School, but that was no good either.

I just had no initiative. I didn't see the point of getting a diploma or a credential because I didn't know what I would do with it. I didn't know that I could choose to become something. Even when I was told that I could, the low self-esteem told me I wouldn't be able to do it. Many years later, I learned that I had ADD. But at the time, there were no words for that. I finally quit high school in the 11th grade, when I was nineteen-and-a-half.

I spent four years in the Navy, and while I was there, I earned a GED and a couple of Navy diplomas. And somehow through that experience, I “woke up” about education. I knew that I wanted to go to college and make something of myself. At the time I wanted to be a teacher at a school where I could teach kids who were like I used to be. I wanted to grab them—all of them—and make them think about life outside of their neighborhood, and understand the value of academic achievements and of studying, studying, studying.

I applied to colleges—Morgan State and Temple—and Temple offered me a full athletic scholarship. But first I had to take the SAT exam (which was known at that time as the College Boards). I was sure the test was going to be a roadblock. Remember, I never cracked a book for all of those years I spent in high school. Geometry, Trigonometry, Calculus...those books stayed *closed*. I could have sold them afterward as brand new. When I sat for the exam, I felt like a dying person, seeing my life pass before my eyes — all those things that the teachers at Central and Germantown had tried to teach me.

I never learned what my SAT score was. But I was accepted to Temple. It was a miracle.

In September, I went to freshman orientation, where I was the proudest, if not the oldest, new student to sit there. The speaker said: “Look to your left. Look to your right. One of those people will not make it to graduation.” Well, I knew that the speaker was not talking about *me*. I was driven: I knew where I was going, and I knew what I wanted to do. I believed that professors knew everything. I wanted to sit at their feet and listen to them talk about anything because they knew everything in their discipline.

My freshman year roster? It was remedial English, remedial math...remedial everything, really. But I didn't care. I felt proud – proud to be given a new life.

My freshman writing course was taught by a professor whose name I can no longer remember. For our first writing assignment, he asked us to write about doing something for the first time. I wrote about pulling my tooth at age six or seven – about how I looked at the tooth in the mirror and wrapped the string around it, and about putting the tongue up, and making the tooth go back and forth, trying not to reach a point of pain. On the day that he passed the essays back, I sat in class and watched as he handed graded papers to all of the other students. He didn't give anything to me, and for a fraction of a brain second, I thought "Oh...that's because I never turned anything in anyway." That's how it always was for me in high school. But then, I realized, "Wait a minute! I did turn it –"

And he was talking. He said, "I want you all to listen to this essay. *This* is the kind of writing I am looking for." He began to read, and it was my paper. I don't remember how the other students responded. I don't think they laughed, because I wasn't trying to be funny. I was trying to get into the feelings of that moment, and to communicate them. To let people see what that was like. When he finally handed me the paper, I saw that I had an A. (An A! The only time I'd ever gotten an "A" in school was when it stood for "Absent.")

This experience lifted me. It showed me that I had something to say, and that I could make a connection with people. For the next assignment, I took a chance and wrote something funny. The title was "Procrastination – or, the Perfect Point." It was about taking a #2 yellow pencil and sharpening it again and again– continuing to look for the perfect shape of the lead and the wood--until there was nothing left but the piece of metal and the eraser. It was all about the feeling I had of not wanting to get started on writing.

In those essays, I felt that I was allowing myself to be seen. It was as if I said, "This is the way I feel, and this is who I am. If you read it, and you enjoy it too, then you understand me." When you are a writer, this is what you have to do. You have to allow yourself to write from what is inside you. Don't cut yourself off and *not* believe in yourself. Try to communicate what you really feel. If you can do that, you will be okay. There may be corrections—there are always corrections—but it will be okay. You just have to allow yourself to be seen.

At Temple, education truly got deep inside of me – now it's in my liver, my thyroid, my left and right eyes—and my classes at Temple set me on a path to do what I am passionate about – writing, performing, and even being honored by the Writers Guild of America. I still want to reach out to kids who are like I was when I was young—the bloomers, the remedial writers, the kids who don't know that they can choose to be something. I hope my story inspires them.