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Talking Back: Lessons in the Wilderness: Student Immersion and Inspiration

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Talking Back

the culture of the college in which we teach.

Some students need more caring than others. And some students may not think or feel they want any at all. I also believe that teachers may find some students more “carable” than others. I suppose it is a matter of fit and need. For my part, I found it easier to care for students who cared about the subject I was teaching as well as those who needed extra help.

My favorite example of the power of a caring professor comes from friend and former colleague, Jean Houston, who wrote in *The Possible Human* about a young Swiss visiting professor of religion, Dr. Jacob Taubes, at Columbia University, who saved her life when she was in the middle of a personal crisis in her junior year. Jean had

experienced several recent deaths in her family and was injured while rehearsing a college play, which resulted in impaired vision: “Dr. Taubes continued to walk me to the bus throughout the term, always challenging me with intellectually challenging questions. He attended to me. I existed to him in the ‘realest’ of senses, and because I existed for him I began to exist for myself. Within several weeks my eyesight came back, my spirit bloomed and I became a fairly serious student.”

A former student, Christine, class of '00, wrote me recently about a course I offered in her sophomore year. For modesty's sake I hesitate, but I feel that it demonstrates the point of the whole article. Some lines from her letter:

Hi, Dr. Lawry,

It's been a long time since I have seen you, but you were and continue to be a major influential person in my life. At Marymount you exposed me to A Course in Miracles and ... other eye-opening philosophies that have remained with me... I was never the same after your course Perennial Quest. [Christine is now getting married and continues:] So, I wanted you to know that you are a true Professor – teaching and supporting your students to grow, think, and be. ... I'll always be grateful to you for that. I know I am often emotional or gushy, but you know me, Dr. L lol. I just never forget true teachers.

Thank you... .

Love, Christine

Lessons in the Wilderness

Student Immersion and Inspiration

By Bill Kriege

do not recall why I went alone that day. Fishing excursions to nearby Swedetown Creek were almost exclusively accomplished in tandem with Randy, my good pal who lived but a few houses away. Maybe he had a dental appointment. Whatever the case, I could not resist perfect fishing conditions - light mist, calm winds, 60 degrees – so I embarked unaccompanied into the Upper Peninsula's

deciduous forest that grew beyond the end of Poplar Street.

Approaching the 12-foot-wide creek bed, I pulled up short to bait the hook, position the sinker, and tune the reel's drag. Since Michigan's state fish was sensitive and easily spooked, it was best to minimize time next to shore, where my prepubescent shadow would broadcast warnings to everything beneath the water's surface. Once sufficiently prepared, I padded toward the creek, just below one of our angling

hot spots. Starting from a downstream location would cloak my presence, as the current washed the sounds and vibration of my footsteps away from fish lurking upstream. I was ready. The familiar sound of water over rock and slate intensified as I made my final advance. I peered across the stream's small gully to locate my first cast. Then I saw him on the opposite bank.

His size struck me. I had never before seen one, save for one included in a taxidermy exhibit and those

illustrated in science books. He stretched three and a half feet from his mischievously whiskered nose to the tip of his tapering tail. Handsome in every way possible, his appearance came complete with an athletically svelte frame and an Arthur Fonzarelli, slicked-back, mousey-brown hairdo. He frolicked along the water's edge in a fusion of shadow-boxing and *prancercising* that included rock lifting, barrel-rolling, and water-splashing in fits and spurts. I watched for as long as my fleeting concealment, bolstered by my fishing prowess (skill) and down-wind location (sheer luck), permitted. I watched and smiled.

Fast-forwarding 30 years found me again in the U.P.'s wooded heartland. Nine Rockhurst University retreatants stood with me in silence on the eastern shores of Loon Lake, an over-the-top showpiece of God's pristine creativeness. As was our custom, we paused from canoe paddling and portaging for noon prayer. Standing arms' length apart, we silently looked westward across the half-mile wide lake. The water, colored somewhere between the blue of a robin's egg and the green that one might associate with the Mediterranean Sea, easily lapped the shore. Dr. Seuss-like white clouds floated by, aided by a soft breeze and reflected on the water surface. Hardwood leaves, lime-green in their adolescence, back-dropped darker green conifers lining the far shore's banks. The students and I breathed together in gratitude.

I heard her first, a rapid series of pint-sized *eeek, eeek, eeeks* that betrayed her majesty. Rapidly glancing over my right shoulder afforded me the sight of her skimming the forest's top. She swooped low directly overhead and then flapped chocolate wingtips to gain altitude over the water. Dumbstruck, we watched her



and her six-foot wingspan soar across the lake and over the opposite shore's wooded horizon. We couldn't muster a syllable.

We had obviously piqued her curiosity. Given her vantage point and her keen eyes, she had seen us from afar. Given our status as the only humans within the 18,000-acre wilderness area, she clearly wanted to see us that morning. She *chose* to fly over us. She wanted to watch us. Wild animals possess far more efficacious veiling abilities than my best fishing tactics; they had likely watched me from afar on many previous occasions. However, this was my first, or at least my most poignant, experience of being deliberately sought and intentionally watched by one of my evolutionarily older animal siblings.

We humans have watched nature for a long time. We have watched, studied, and prayed over the signs of the times on planet Earth. We have cored the depths of Antarctic ice and plumbed the depths of our sacred texts in search of themes and guidance and motivation. Our watching

has rendered fruits, even if they continue to evolve.

I believe, however, we are now moving into an intense period of *being* watched. The scientific community has rendered its verdict: human activity has and will continue to destabilize the climate and destroy entire ecosystems. Can societies use our best scientific and technological advancements to live regeneratively? Pope Francis has spoken. Can the church grow a spirituality that moves us into right relationship with God's created world? A Climate Summit convened last November in Paris. Can nations abandon competition and the myth of perpetual growth in favor of collaboration and economies of enough? Our older siblings – the Brook Trout, River Otters, Bald Eagles, Hemlocks, Maples, Cedars, and White Pines - watch in hopeful curiosity. ■

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