

The History Professor

by John W. Nichols

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I'm an addict. I nibble historical fiction, devour biographies, and gorge myself with documents of all kinds. The dates, places, and names of history energize me. I learn, retain, and in my quiet moments, analyze and categorize. I am the person to avoid at parties as my conversations bore others to tears.

My parents funded my odyssey and the history department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill became my home. The glow of possibility emanated from my pores. I worked hard, eventually earning my Ph.D. in United States History. I was ready to write best-selling books and educate the American populous on the pertinent facts of our heritage.

Ten years of real life brought unexpected turns and littered my path with obfuscating debris. I landed at a backwater college teaching US History 101 and 102 to bored students who pay their fees and are happy with "C's". Students in most degree programs must pass through my shop to be vaccinated against further interest in history. I cover the same material semester after semester and deliver my lectures in emotion free monotone. Like my disinterested students, I can sleepwalk through the class.

The start of the previous semester brought the latest gaggle of potential scholars into the lecture hall. I introduced myself and talked through the syllabus as I scanned the room. My

thought train derailed completely when I recognized a student at the back. Any employee of our college is entitled to a free audit of one class per semester, part of our benefits package. I had no idea why the building janitor, Mr. J, would choose my class or how it would contribute to his chosen career path. What a semester this promised to be with a class roster of bored students and one aging loser.

Mr. J arrived on time for class, sat in the same seat each day, and seemed eager to learn the material. His wardrobe included worn jeans and a series of shirts with name patches sewed above the pocket. The names changed with shirt color and I tagged him as a thrift store shopper. His scuffed work boots completed the ensemble and though he sat in plain sight, students ignored him.

Mr. J took copious notes. His pen was in constant motion as I droned through my lectures and he filled page after page in his composition books. I wanted to see those pages and learn what he was capturing from my storehouse of knowledge. Perhaps he was a professional doodler. He never raised his hand or volunteered information in class discussions. He simply sponged as much history as he could in the 50 minute sessions, collected his notes and returned to work.

Mr. J's student status allowed him to take exams but I was under no obligation to grade his work. I had plenty of exams from paying students to slog through but curiosity overtook me and I picked his test from the pile. My surprise equaled that of the judges when Susan Boyle first sang on Britain's Got Talent. I was blown away. Mr. J's test was perfect. Every answer was meticulously printed and his essay was well-constructed. He showed promise, the kind of promise I had intended to invest my life discovering after I left the University of North Carolina.

I returned his paper in the next session and asked Mr. J to talk with me after class. As the day's session approached the end, my stomach was churning. For some reason the thought of

talking with this student made me nervous. He had twice as many years of life under his belt as I did and my gut told me there was more to Mr. J than met my eye.

I mentioned my observation of his note taking and asked if I could look at his pages. I had to know what he was gleaning from my halfhearted lecture. There were no doodles, just page after page of neatly written notes. He accurately captured the essence of the lectures. As we talked I discovered he was an avid reader and his tastes include the historical and biographical tomes I reveled to digest. I left the lecture hall with my head a little higher and my insides burning with a rekindled spark of desire. There are others like me out there.

In History 101 class requirements for a passing grade include the completion of a short research paper. The students hate doing the assignment as much as I hate grading it but the experience is mandated by the college. Those pupils doomed to repeat my class usually fail to complete the paper. The topics are simple. The challenge for the student is to research the data then actually write the paper.

I stopped by the library one evening and saw Mr. J at a table in the back. He was not alone. One of our college athletes, a repeat student in my class, was sitting with Mr. J. I could tell their discussion was intense. I walked behind a rack of books, and moved to a spot where I could hear their conversation. The janitor was helping the jock with his research. Mr. J patiently explained how to find the important facts and organize notes. He demonstrated how an outline can lead to well-formed paragraphs. He stepped into the role of teacher and walked the young man through the mystery of composing a research paper.

As the semester wound down, I offered my students an option. They could deliver a speech on "What America Means to Me" instead of taking the final exam. We reserved time in the last class sessions for the presentations. As I pulled the sign-up sheet from the board, I

noticed Mr. J chose the last time slot on the last day of class. After snooping on his tutorial session in the library, I was curious to hear his speech but I feared he would be laughed to scorn as he addressed the class in his personalized shirts.

On the day scheduled for his speech, Mr. J was not in class. That was an oddity and I wondered if his job responsibilities spirited him away to address an overflowing toilet or a spilled soft drink. Class was nearing the end when the door opened and the janitor slipped into his usual spot. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I called his name and every head turned to watch as he came forward. He was wearing an immaculate uniform of the United States Army. From the medals and ribbons emblazoned on his chest, I knew he had done time in combat. The gold bar on his collar told me his rank was second lieutenant. His shoes were polished to resemble mirrors and he marched to a cadence no one else heard. The room grew still. Mr. J did something in those seconds I failed to do in a semester of classes. He captured the attention of my students.

The older man walked to the podium and began to speak. His deep voice demanded respect. He took us on a journey to Viet Nam, a war from our history that continues to stir strong emotions.

"My family sent many sons to battle through the years and the Viet Nam war was no exception. My older brother became a Marine and was decorated repeatedly for his heroism in those jungles. Everyone expected I would follow his lead after I completed high school, but I had other ideas. I became a war protester, determined not to participate."

"I was proud of my stance, certain I was right, until the news arrived from the Marine Corps. My brother had been killed in action and my world turned upside down. He was buried in Arlington with full honors. I walked among the markers in that sacred cemetery and learned a

lesson. I live in the greatest nation on earth but someone died to buy my freedom. Freedom is never free. Blood is the price. My brother paid that price."

"I joined the airborne and the next several years were a nightmare I can't forget. I became a combat medic and my team carried injured men out of the kill zone to safety. In unimaginable conditions we did what we could to save lives. Some injured men made it but many died. With each loss my resolve grew stronger and my sense of obligation to the debt I owed grew larger. I was wounded several times, recovered and kept on, until the last injury forced me stateside. My career as a soldier was over."

"America is the greatest place on earth and I love my country. I would go back to Viet Nam and live that time over to demonstrate my commitment to her. I would give my life to defend her. America is the land of hope. America means everything to me."

Mr. J snapped to attention, turned to the flag waving on the pole outside and saluted. He marched down the aisle and out the door. I noticed a few students wiping tears as I managed to mumble, "Class dismissed."

I sat for several minutes in that empty room with my head in my hands thinking about what I just heard. My heart was broken. I had lost sight of the goal. Influencing and teaching students is a tremendous responsibility. I am not willing to relinquish that role to people who dispense hate and promote violence. This is a great country and I also owe her a debt. I must explain to a new generation what America means to me. I marched to my office to begin revamping History 102. I would be a different teacher next class.

I passed History 101. The professor was the best I ever had.

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