

Fall 1994

THOUGHTS ON TEACHING
BRYANT MANGUM, VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH
UNIVERSITY

University of Florida

From the time that I was nine until about the time I turned twelve my dad and I spent much time together in our green Ford club coupe traveling back country roads outside Ruby, S.C. During these trips, most of which took place at twilight or in the dark, my dad would suspend the rules of polite and conventional conversation, and we would discuss every subject imaginable. This behavior was unusual for my dad, who was in many ways bound absolutely by propriety and convention and who had such a Calvinist work ethic that he would wear a white shirt and necktie when we went fishing for fear that someone would see him and think he was having too much fun.

But on our long drives in the green Ford he forgot about all of this and would ask me question after question on subjects ranging from where I thought the universe ended to whether I thought watermelon ought to be eaten with or without a spoon. "Could a loving God really have punished a good man like Job?" he would ask me. "Should Doctor Newsome," who was the only doctor in Ruby, "be morally obligated to inform a patient that he is dying even when the doctor thinks the patient will be better off not knowing?" Over a period of those three years he asked hundreds of questions like these, and I would answer them with innocent certainty. He would listen to every word of every answer and usually follow each with another question, typically one beginning with "I see your point, but what if" And then I would set off in another direction, illuminating for him, so I thought, the truth about life. When I would finish, he would often respond with a story that absolutely supported my point or suggested an opposite view.

Outside that Ford Dad and I had many disagreements, and there was not much of what people would call equality in our relationship. But in the car on those long, wonderful rides I discovered the world of ideas, where there is no such thing as a wrong idea, where two people treat each other with dignity, each listening carefully to what the other is saying--a place where the search is more for a better question than for the right

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are more connected by their shared humanity than they are separated by their differences.

Some students have never experienced the learning that comes from this kind of openness and acceptance; some never will again. I have had students come up to me after a class and say, "I see this book as presenting a point of view totally different from the last book that we read. I disagree strongly with both of them, but I didn't know if it was appropriate to mention this in class." I respond to such a statement: "If you can't bring up such ideas in a college room, where will you ever be able to express them?"

I consider my teaching successful when students feel free to express themselves openly in class in an environment of mutual respect, when they bring ideas that have originated in the class to my office for further discussion, when I am able to see that the power of storytelling has helped them make connections in their lives, and when students come by two, five, or ten years later to tell me that an idea we discussed in class influenced their lives. I am thrilled almost beyond words when a student from a decade or so ago comes back into my office, sits down under the same poster of Hemingway that has been there forever, and picks up almost as if from mid-sentence a discussion that began back when he or she was an undergraduate. That is when I have my highest hopes for the triumph of the human spirit.