

G A P

By J. Hill Hamon

NEAR THE END of my 36 year college teaching career, I was invited by a colleague, Martha, to come and chat with her Freshman Studies class. Martha Gehringer, an English professor, was director of the Writing Center, where she aided students in the writing of class and term papers. The Freshman Studies course was designed to help students develop their writing skills, to pull them from their secondary public school passive shells, and induce them to become active in the classroom, questioning, thinking, and expressing themselves openly before their peers. They read selected literature and wrote weekly papers, many of which were position papers forcing them to take a stand and state an opinion about general, and often controversial, articles and books. The course largely substituted for what was, in my days, Freshman English, wherein grammar and writing principles were taught. Martha invited me as an active scholar, a publishing author. I was flattered at the invitation and readily accepted.

Certainly I had noticed that the freshmen seemed to get younger every year. I had heard much from my colleagues about a "generation gap" -- primarily an age disparity gap, a barrier that they acknowledged they were aware of between themselves and their students. Never had I

experienced any comparable barrier with my own minions. I felt that I was able to communicate with them easily and intimately, and most of them seemed to respond in uninhibited fashion in my biology and geology classes. When I arrived at the classroom, I was greeted by about 20 kids whom I easily could have assumed were junior high school students. None of them was in my beginning biology course. Most seemed bored, but indulgent, a typical captive audience, who wished to be elsewhere -- anywhere but in a classroom facing a strange new professor.

Sharing is the basic theme of my approach to teaching, which had always been an exciting passion for me. I enjoyed sharing my knowledge, insights, and experiences with inquiring minds. My definition of teaching is "pointing out the obvious," a process of asking questions and directing students' attention to big, though often subtle, details of basic principles. I felt that my classes were more of a dialogue with the students than long, straight, detailed lectures. It was fun to explore interesting subjects--and a challenge to be as fresh and spontaneous as possible conjuring up fresh examples whenever I could. I never became bored in the classroom and felt that if I enjoyed our exchanges, students would too. They are a perspicacious bunch who can tell if their instructors are bored with their teaching duties; if I was bored, then they were bored. Student preparation for classes is extremely important. If they read and do the assignments before they come to class, they can learn more, and I can explain more than if they come in and encounter the details of a subject cold. Often what a student brings to class, to a subject, is

more important than what I am introducing that is new to them. This is especially true in the humanities, which enable them to understand often subtle images of literature, poetry, and art. The purpose of academic curricula is to enable students to build a foundation of information so they can understand the basics of our rich cultural heritage. Without this foundation, both students and teachers are handicapped, and the process of sharing and exchanging of information is severely limited. I assumed that we all shared a common culture and many common experiences, but this day I quickly became dismayed and frustrated. I could find few, or no common knowledge or experiences.

I read them a couple of my shorter, popular papers and received only blank stares. I tried to discuss samples of great literature, but they had not read any of the books or poems, or heard of the authors that I assumed were shared and common knowledge. I soon found that I was discussing such details with Martha but with none of the students.

I shifted gears, and subjects, and began to talk about the great composers and their music of our wonderful Western Hemisphere heritage and found the same enormous paucity of knowledge about even the most famous and most familiar masters, such as Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert. They knew nothing about our rich musical heritage! Again, Martha and I ended up sharing our love and appreciation of the world's greatest music. I asked them to share their interest in music and found that I knew none of the all-contemporary pop-rock composers or their ephemeral compositions. We shared no heritage of music.

I tried to discuss art -- painters, sculptors, internationally and almost universally known by educated people, and again drew a blank. Martha and I gossiped about anecdotes concerning great artists and favorite paintings and sculpture, and the students sat there mute, unable even to comment.

I showed them a few of my photographs, which seemed to interest a few, but they knew nothing of the history of the art -- or the legacies of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, or Elliott Porter, or of current day photographic artists. Their cultural heroes seemed to be limited to Michael Jackson and Michael Jordan.

When the period ended, I left the class with the feeling, for the first time in my life, of a generation gap with students. But it was a cultural, rather than an age-related, gap. This cultural gap was more immense than the Grand Canyon! I knew it wasn't fair to expect a very profound dialogue with them -- after all, I had about a 40 year head start on them, and I had always considered myself to be an active student. I nevertheless felt that, as a freshman, my knowledge of the liberal arts and science had been considerably greater than theirs. For the first time in my academic career, I felt dismayed and frustrated that I was not able to communicate with some students, a somewhat shattering experience. Martha and I had much to share with one another, but her students didn't, and couldn't! I retreated to my home that afternoon, depressed at the experience, and even doubting my ability to teach. But I felt better after dinner when I sipped some delicious wine and lost myself in the beautiful intricacies of a recording of Mozart's soul-soothing G-minor Symphony.

As dismally disappointed and disillusioned as I was from the class encounter, I am by nature an optimist and believe that if I returned to a class of the same students four years later, I would be greatly surprised at how much they had learned. I have a good memory and remember when I also was ignorant of such basic facts and concepts. I recall attending class periods in physics, chemistry, and mathematics, where the professor spoke rapidly for the entire period while filling the blackboard with unintelligible numbers and symbols, and I didn't understand a single word of his lecture. Many professors with outstanding reputations were very poor teachers because they assumed that others knew as much about the subject as they did and seemed unable to perceive or accept the students' ignorance of basics. I felt that I was a better teacher because I could remember my former ignorance; every time I walked into a classroom as a teacher, I paused and wondered how many of my students would not understand a word of my lecture. This profoundly affected my approach to teaching.



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BOB WEIGEL VISITS

One of my oldest and strongest friends, Robert W. Weigel, a classmate and retired biology colleague

from Bloomington, Illinois, visited me this week. Bob and I are alter-egos, and share many common interests – science, music, printing, photography, graphic arts computer technology, and a galaxy of other fascinating subjects. Bob is an accomplished new digital video “film” maker, who has mastered the very complicated technique of making and editing and assembling high quality video movies. We made our third visit to make additional pictures of Gray Zeitz and his print shop at Monterey, Kentucky, a village about 30 miles north of my home in Frankfort, in the edge of the Bluegrass region of the state. Gray makes a living hand-setting foundry type and printing extraordinarily beautiful books on acid-free papers. This is Gray Zeitz.



We also went to Lexington to meet Jim Birchfield at the King Library, and went out for lunch and much sparkling conversation about all kinds of printing and music-related subjects. I count myself extremely fortunate to have such bright, inspiring friends who are so creative and active and so much fun to be around. #

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