

WHO'S CHEATING WHOM? ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AS A VEHICLE FOR DEEP LEARNING

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I

I was a senior at Middvale High School.¹ In less than two weeks I would graduate and—as far as I knew—say goodbye (and fuck off!) to the midwestern, rustbelt town I had called home for as long as I could remember. For four long years, I had dutifully completed every class assignment placed in front of me—pages of formulas and factoring exercises, numerous spelling and vocabulary quizzes, and an endless array of readings highlighting names and dates of significant historical events. Taken individually, assignments such as these were laughably superficial. For instance, although I had spent at least two years studying American history, I knew virtually nothing about the United States after World War II. Watergate? *Nope*. Vietnam? *Never*. The New Jim Crow? *No way!* The War on Drugs? *Get real already!* Any details that might cast America in an unflattering light were conveniently omitted from our class texts and conversations. Yet taken as a whole, the curriculum was surprisingly demanding—not so much in terms of its rigor or capacity to challenge problematic beliefs—but rather in keeping students busy, distracted, and compliant.

School was not a place for debate or dialog about important issues of the day or for considering alternatives to the status quo. It was certainly not a place to solve *real* problems students might confront after graduation.

It was in this context that I found myself in 1987—a high school senior in a midwestern steel town. The heartland. Ohio—land of the free and home of the blissfully ignorant (the more things change, the more they stay the same). *Oh my God! How do I get out of this place?* With two weeks left, my mind was focused on little more than escape from this world, doing what I could to avoid class altogether.

II

I spent a lot of time in the Middvale High School library, studying for exams in my final weeks. The library was an excellent place to take a break from classes (and classmates). Sprawled on a beanbag chair in a secluded corner, I stretched my legs while leafing through the latest issue of *Guitar for the Practicing Musician*. As I flipped through the magazine's pages, dreaming about my future as a famous rock star, a mop of steely blue caught my eyes. Peeking over the top of my reading material, I watched Miss Shupe, my senior English teacher, hobble into the library copy room. Her presence reminded me of the bullying and finger-pointing we had endured. My mind drifted to an incident earlier in the year between Miss Shupe and my classmate, Ellie Faulkner.

"Miss Faulkner? Excuse me, Miss Faulkner?"

"Yes."

"What have we here, Miss Faulkner?"

"My homework?"

An immediate hush fell over the classroom. Twenty-five high school seniors sat in complete silence as Miss Shupe snatched my classmate's homework and held it up for all to see, pressing arthritis-curved fingers to pursed lips.

"Ladies and Gentlemen. It appears that Miss Faulkner is having some difficulty with our troublesome words list, isn't she?"

No one said a word. Jocks. Stoners. Class clowns. Nerds. None of them dared to interrupt a Miss Shupe tirade.

"I said, Miss Faulkner is having some trouble, ISN'T SHE??"

I closed my eyes wearily as a handful of students responded in unison.

"Yes, Miss Shupe."

"Maybe Miss Faulkner needs some additional encouragement to do the kind of work that she needs to do to be successful. Don't you think?"

In neatly spaced rows, we all watched as Miss Shupe eviscerated our friend. The blue-haired one sauntered to the front of our classroom, reached into the glass canister on her desk, and took out a small dog treat.

"Ms. Faulkner, maybe this bone will serve as a reminder to you to take your homework more seriously. I do not take kindly to lazy dogs like you!"

With that, Miss Shupe walked towards Ellie, dog treat in hand, and pushed the bone against the teen girl's clenched lips. Tears streamed down my friend's face as she endured the icy one's humiliation in silence.

Miss Shupe was cold, vicious, and—at times—brilliant. No one could recite a poem like the blue-haired one. Her reading of *Macbeth* remains one of the most memorable and powerful moments of my formal education. Although Miss Shupe was a living legend among the many generations of students she had taught at Middvale High School, only glimpses of her former brilliance remained when I enrolled in her senior English class. While I loved many of our class readings—from Shakespearean sonnets and Greek legends to the works of the great Romantic poets—Miss Shupe's behavior was terrifyingly erratic, irrational, and increasingly violent. And although she passed away more than two decades ago, my relationship with her has continued to evolve. In much the same way that my understanding of memorable pieces of writing has evolved through time, my thoughts about Miss Shupe have changed as I've grown from a teenager into a teacher and parent. When I was 18, Miss Shupe represented everything I resented about school. Back then, her lessons for me had little to do with Keats, Wordsworth, or Lord Byron and much more to do with the dangers of unquestioned teacher authority, student conformity, and hubris.

Although I kept my mouth shut in her class, I didn't respect her as a teacher. She was an obstacle to be overcome rather than someone to learn from or understand. However, as I've experienced the struggles of aging firsthand, Miss Shupe's lessons remind me of the hazards of growing old and the tremendous responsibility that teachers are entrusted with in the development and care of students. *Words matter, and actions matter even more.*

III

I slumped in my beanbag chair, hiding my face from Miss Shupe's line of sight. I certainly didn't want her to recognize me, much less come over and talk to me about my preparation for tomorrow's big essay exam or graduation plans (a favorite topic of hers). With my head buried in an Eddie Van Halen expose, I listened intently for signs of Miss Shupe's departure. After what seemed like hours, I overheard the head librarian greet Miss Shupe by the front desk.

"Have a good day, Beth. Good luck with all of your end-of-the-quarter grading."

"Yes, I will certainly be working diligently these next few days, Miss Slatter. Thanks much."

With that friendly exchange, the coast was clear. I headed to the copier with a handful of dimes to photocopy the Eddie Van Halen article for a friend. As I got closer to the

machine, I noticed that Miss Shupe had left a piece of paper facedown on the glass. Turning the sheet over, I was astounded by what I saw. Honestly, I could not believe my eyes.

Oh.

My.

GOD!!!

There, as plain as day, was Shupe's final exam. "Maybe she really is losing it," I thought to myself. "How else could she have forgotten her original?" My heart raced as I looked around, snatched the exam off the copier, folded it neatly, and placed it in my bookbag for further analysis later in the evening. "Hot damn! I'm going to ace this one!" As the ring of the 8th period bell signaled the end of the school day, I lowered my head, avoided eye-contact with everyone in the library, and headed for home—eager to craft responses to Miss Shupe's essay questions.

IV

I ran upstairs to my bedroom, tossed my bookbag on my waterbed (note: this was the 1980s), and carefully unfolded the final exam. Scrutinizing the sheet, I was pleased by what I read—namely, a lone writing prompt inviting my classmates and me to delve into the characteristics of tragic heroes. Miss Shupe's question was genuinely intriguing.

Recall that a tragic hero is a literary character who makes a judgment error that inevitably leads to his own destruction. In no more than 2000 words, explore a tragic hero from the present. Discuss how your hero satisfies Aristotle's definition of tragic hero. Provide detailed evidence in support of your claims.

With the prompt in front of me, I sat down at my desk and began to jot down characteristics. Miss Shupe had discussed these so frequently that they were literally seared into my brain: (1) *Hamarta*, a flaw or error of judgment; (2) *Peripeteia*, a reversal of fortune brought about because of the hero's error in judgment; (3) *Anagnorisis*, the discovery or recognition that the reversal was brought about by the hero's own actions; and (4) *Hubris*, excessive pride (Lucas, 1968). As I considered each of these qualities, I mulled over names in my mental Rolodex, trying to think of someone, *anyone*, to write about. While I could list many examples of people who satisfied one or two qualities of tragic heroes, it was difficult to come up with a subject who met *all* (or even *most*) of the requirements. Anxiously, I paced around the house, waiting for inspiration. I tidied my room, brushed my teeth, and emptied the dishwasher. While brewing a pot of Maxwell House, I considered present-day heroes.

Pete Rose? He was a favorite athlete and hometown hero. As the manager of the Cincinnati Reds, Rose bet on baseball and was banished from the game. That was certainly an example of *hamarta*. However, a tragic hero must be intelligent enough to learn from personal mistakes. Intelligent? Pete Rose? *Are you kidding?* Learn from his mistakes? *No way!* Charlie Hustle never acknowledged the error of his ways or expressed any remorse for his bad decisions. Thus, Pete Rose struck out as the subject for my essay.

Eddie Van Halen? He was a favorite musician and entertainer. Eddie's *hubris* alienated his lead singer, David Lee Roth, and broke up the greatest rock and roll act of my generation (namely, Van Halen!). Certainly THAT was a tragedy of epic proportions—particularly among 12th graders at Middvale High School. However, a tragic hero must also be imperfect. This helps the audience see themselves in the

character and feel empathy. *Imperfect? Eddie Van Halen? No way!* For many of us, EVH was the epitome of perfection. His signature song, “Eruption,” revolutionized guitar playing for an entire generation of headbangers. Moreover, Eddie was as popular as ever after the break-up. Sammy Hagar, an exceptionally good singer and skilled frontman, replaced Roth—taking Van Halen to even greater heights of success. Hence, Eddie was not the tragic hero I needed.

For a good 45 minutes, I wracked my brain, trying to think of *someone* in my life who had a tragic flaw. *Mom? Dad? Uncle Wendell? Aunt Velma? Mamaw? Cousin Andy?* Sure, all of these people were flawed—they were *family*, after all! Unfortunately, none of them had met their demise as the result of a tragic flaw. The same was true of my closest school friends—Jeff, Scott, Gus, Sean, Rick, Jennifer, Tony. None had dealt with tragedy or loss like Macbeth or Willie Loman or Cleopatra or any of the myriad other characters we had read about in Shupe’s class.

“Shit! What am I going to do?”

Suddenly, without warning (and after a second cup of joe), the subject of my paper came into focus. *AH HA!* There was absolutely NO DOUBT who I HAD to write about. This was going to be *good*. I could feel it in my bones.

V

For the next several hours, I wrote like a man possessed. With a sharpened number two pencil and a stack of blank blue books (the preferred medium for recording in-class writing back before word processors and cell phones), I made my case for *Miss Shupe as tragic hero*.

Hamartia? Check. Hubris? Check? But what about anagnorisis and peripeteia? I decided to write about anger as Miss Shupe’s “fatal” flaw. While at one time she was regarded as one of the best teachers in the history of Middvale High, her propensity to single out weak students and bully them mercilessly contributed to her fall as an educator. My heart raced as I scribbled my arguments across multiple blue books. Although I was initially hesitant to write such a critical analysis about Miss Shupe—particularly in a paper that she might read (!!!)—as I delved deeper into my subject, a flood of pent-up emotion rushed over me. Tears welled in my eyes as I channeled a year’s worth of anger, frustration, and resentment into my response. Writing never felt *this good* before. *Liberating. Cathartic. Empowering.* Go to hell, Miss Shupe!

VI

Exam day. There was a buzz of anticipation in the air as I entered Miss Shupe’s classroom. Voices of anxiety, insecurity, and TERROR filled my ears.

“Are you ready for the exam?”

“What did you study? This was IMPOSSIBLE to prepare for.”

“Ellie Faulkner took the exam second period. She said it was a BEAST!”

“Oh my GOD, this is going to SUCK.”

“Did you bring lots of sharpened pencils?”

“What can she possibly ask? We only have 2 hours. There’s no way I’m going to finish this in time.”

If my classmates only knew what I had in my backpack, they wouldn’t believe it!

As Miss Shupe quieted class, going over general guidelines for the exam (e.g., no talking, open notes, blue books), I unzipped my bag and glanced at my copy of *Guitar for the Practicing Musician*. Eddie’s grin seemed to widen as I placed my completed essay underneath the blank blue books that Miss Shupe had distributed. As my heart

did its best to exit my chest, no one seemed to notice my actions. They were too busy worrying about the exam to pay too much attention to me.

At this point, the *real fun* began (not!). I hadn't considered that I wouldn't have much to do since I had already completed my responses. *What was I going to do for the next two hours?* I needed to provide Miss Shupe and others with the illusion that I was working on the exam. I needed something to write. Ultimately, I decided to write my girlfriend an amorous missive. It was a *perfect* plan. I could look busy, *and* I could score some points with Jennifer. With two hours, I'd have no problem writing the most epic love letter of all time!

My plan proceeded without a hitch for the first 30 minutes. I immersed myself in writing, composing flirtatious poems and limericks, dirty jokes, humorous drawings, and romantic top-ten lists with reckless abandon. I was so preoccupied with my work that I overlooked Miss Shupe as she approached my desk from behind. She spoke to me in a low whisper as she placed her hand firmly on my left shoulder.

"Mister Edwards, I presume!"

Oh my fucking God!

"Miss Shupe! How are you today?"

"Just fine, Mister Edwards. Just fine. So what are you working on at the moment?"

Oh my fucking God! She's caught me. I'm busted. Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!

"Well, at the moment, I'm deciding who to write about. I've narrowed it down to two or three people, and I'm weighing the pros and cons of each."

"That sounds good, Todd. You're a talented writer."

"Thanks, Miss Shupe."

"I know we've had our differences in the past. I won't mention your little performance at homecoming again."

"I know. I know. That was stupid."

"We all make mistakes. You're one of my best students. Like I've said many times, I forgive you."

Damn, Miss Shupe. Don't say such nice things! Don't you know what I've written about you? Of course, you don't. Ughh.

"Thank you, Miss Shupe."

And with that, Miss Shupe walked away, a blue book of scribbles on full display on my desktop. *Thank God she didn't notice. Oh my GOD. She's crazy, and I'm an asshole!*

I don't know if Miss Shupe ever read my thesis about her tragic downfall. I never saw my blue book writings after I placed them on her desk and left senior English class for the last time. The blue-haired one never gave me any feedback—not even a "good job!" or "interesting arguments!" On the other hand, I'm happy to note that my love letter to Jennifer WAS well-received (we celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary in 2020).

VII

Although I graduated from high school nearly 35 years ago, my experiences in Miss Shupe's class continue to inform my work. As a teacher educator, my principal role is to prepare future teachers to engage and inspire young people. Although I work primarily with pre-service mathematics teachers (many of whom are reluctant writers)—I make a point to engage *all* of my students in writing, regardless of their chosen major. *All* teachers need to recognize the power of writing as a vehicle for deep learning and a tool for self-expression.

Although my interactions with Miss Shupe were overwhelmingly negative, she taught me many things—most notably, the importance of providing students with opportunities to write about issues that matter to them (Romano, 2015). Although Miss Shupe rarely, if ever, provided me with options to select my writing prompts, her “take home” final exam set the stage for some of the most engaging writing of my high school career—precisely because I was able to explore tragic heroes in a way that was meaningful to me. By connecting course content with issues of great personal concern—bullying, compliance, and conformity—I was able to make the topic my own. As a result, I learned quite a bit about myself, Miss Shupe, and Greek tragedy—all in one fell swoop.

Another takeaway from Shupe's class involves academic dishonesty and testing culture. Until I wrote this *currere* reflection, I was convinced that I had cheated on Miss Shupe's final exam. Now, I'm not so sure. Although my actions afforded me the luxury of writing at home—a benefit that my classmates were not provided—I didn't spend more time writing than anyone else. Moreover, Miss Shupe allowed us to use notes on the exam. I didn't use any outside resources while crafting my response. As such, any advantage I had over my peers was essentially negligible. As I've reflected on my Shupe final exam experience, the incident has encouraged me to reconsider student assessment. As a high school math teacher, and more recently as a teacher educator, I've shied away from timed, in-class exams—opting instead for take-home tests and writing assignments.

Lastly, although Miss Shupe's behavior was reprehensible, my judgment of her conduct has softened over the years. My opinion is tempered by recent experiences with cognitive decline and aging. In the 1980s, the word *dementia* was alien to me. Several years after I graduated, Miss Shupe was placed on medical leave after she threw a pair of scissors at one of her students. Hers was the first case of Alzheimer's that I had ever known. After talking to a number of her former students, it became apparent how cruel the disease was for her. The malady transformed a gifted teacher and a pillar of the Middvale community into a classroom bully—one who inspired little more than fear in her final days. Miss Shupe's exit from the classroom wasn't celebrated with accolades from former students or a halftime speech; instead, she was greeted with a police escort for her final exit from the high school. Indeed, she did not deserve this fate.

Ultimately, Miss Shupe's story is a cautionary tale about aging and a disease that afflicts more than 6 million Americans—a number that is projected to more than double by 2050 (Alzheimer's Association, 2020). In this sense, Miss Shupe's tragic flaw wasn't her anger, it was her *genetics*, something entirely out of her control. As such, her story has taught me the dangers of judging too quickly. More often than not, others' stories—those of our students, colleagues, friends, and family—are hidden from view. Behavior that seems irrational at first glance, may—in fact—have a rational explanation, but only if we take the time to listen, learn, and judge less.

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Endnotes

¹ A pseudonym. All names and locations have been changed to protect the anonymity of my teachers and classmates.