

# THE ANCHOR, THE BRIDGE, THE LESSON

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Dr. Z walked into the classroom that first day looking supremely confident. Chair of the speech and theatre department, he was impeccably dressed in a blue tailored suit, white shirt with pearl cufflinks poking out of the sleeves, and a striped blue and white tie. His thinning black hair, combed straight back, looked moist. He was clean shaven, and when he passed my desk, I caught a wiff of cologne.

As the second quarter began in January 1971, I, too, was confident. I had two quarters of speech and English courses to take and a stint of a few weeks working in the university summer theatre. Then, I'd graduate. A short story I'd written was slated for publication in the campus creative arts magazine. And I was a new father. Two weeks earlier, on Christmas Eve, my wife delivered a girl.

One course required of my speech minor was Oral Interpretation II. The previous year I'd gotten a B in Oral Interpretation I. Initially, I'd thought the course title meant that we'd be required to read literature and speak about what it meant, interpret it orally, something that concerned me since my interpretation of literature rarely matched the teacher's.

I was wrong. Oral interpretation meant reading aloud in a way that listeners would understand the meaning, emotion, and import of our literary selection—no explaining, no dissecting. In oral interpretation, we gave breath and sound to words on the printed page. We read at a speed the text seemed to dictate—modulating our voices, pausing strategically, differentiating between an author's omniscient voice and dialog spoken by characters.

Orally interpreting the written word is a skill I've used often in nearly 50 of teaching.

Dr. Z's voice that first class was calm, precise, and deliberate. He enunciated each word. It was like nothing spoken back home in my father's neighborhood tavern. I thought Dr. Z sounded British.

"Welcome to oral interpretation," he said. "You will do well in this course if you are widely read and amenable to being coached to speak in a way that respects the literature. You'll find, no doubt, that you have to leave behind your midwestern dialect."

The next week we began round after round of oral interpretations. And what pleasure it was, if a little nerve wracking until we got comfortable standing in front of our peers reading aloud literature we loved, a diverse sampling of poems, fiction, nonfiction, drama, cuttings from longer works to fit into the three to five minutes we were allotted.

My first two cuttings were from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" and John Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes," a sensual part when Madelaine undresses for bed as her concealed would-be lover looks on.

I remember a young man delivering a wry interpretation of "McCavity, the Mystery Cat" from T. S. Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*.

I remember Polly, slim and sultry, like Barbara Stanwyck in a Hollywood film noir from the 1940s: long silvery hair that fell to her shoulders, tight Levis, blue eyes somehow simultaneously languid and lively. One of her oral interpretations was of George Harrison's "Something." She didn't sing it, though she had it memorized. Her voice was seductive, pleading for us to understand something about her lover, something

ineffable, something impossible to resist. At one point, she shimmied. Her velvet voice, the way she looked so comfortable in her body, the way she filled that space in the front of the small classroom, she was something all right.

I remember one other student from that long-ago class. His name was Michael, handsome, his long brown hair swept to the right. He seemed cool, unrattled. For his first oral interpretation he chose “A Noiseless Patient Spider,” a poem I knew from sophomore year when I encountered Walt Whitman’s work in an American Literature survey course.

Michael walked to the front of the classroom, pulled out the chair to the teacher’s desk, and sat, an unusual move since everyone else had stood, our feet rooted to the floor. Michael opened the book he held, stared at the page, swallowed, and began to read in an assured voice that was unhurried, just like his approach to the desk:

A noiseless patient spider,  
I mark’d where on a little promontory it stood isolated,  
Mark’d how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,  
It launch’d forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,  
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul—

That’s where Michael stopped reading. He stared at the page, breathed in deeply. We at our desks, including Dr. Z., sat stone silent, waiting.

Michael looked up, blinked. “I can’t do this.”

“Can you not go on, Michael?” Dr. Z said, “You are doing fine.”

“I can’t.”

“You do not appear to be nervous,” Dr. Z said. “But if you are, I assure you that with more readings you’ll become more confident.”

Michael said nothing, just sat, holding his book.

“I know this poem,” said Polly. “Your reading is perfect.”

“Please go on,” Dr. Z said. His expression was pained.

“I can’t.” Michael scooted back the chair, the legs screeching against the linoleum floor. He rose, cradling the book in one arm, and walked down the narrow aisle between scattered desks toward the door.

“Michael,” Dr. Z said. “Please. Wait.”

“I can’t.” He lifted his coat from a desk, opened the classroom door, and left, shutting it behind him with a soft click.



We had a textbook in Oral Interpretation II. I bought mine used. Cream-colored pages, long chapters, no illustrations, no diagrams, no pictures. Just academic prose about literature, its many devices and terms from *alliteration* to *zeitgeist*.

At mid-term we halted our rounds of oral interpretations to take a 50-question multiple choice test over the contents of the textbook, which we were to read on our own without benefit of class discussion.

When Dr. Z returned the tests after a week, quiet reigned. Frowns and beetled eyebrows predominated as students studied their test results. Dr. Z stood at the front of the classroom, his arms crossed. Tension was building. Many of the test questions had been ambiguous and some downright obscure (one question involved the close reading of a long footnote in small print that had taken up a third of the page).

Finally, a student spoke: “What about question six? What’s the difference between *synecdoche* and *metonymy* anyway?”

Other students chimed in, asking about that question and others. Dr. Z, in another elegant suit, this one gray, wasn’t giving an inch. He whacked moles, warded off blows, and brushed aside complaints. After he answered questions and dictated correct answers, students pressed him still.

Color crept up Dr. Z’s neck, moving to his cheeks and his ears until they blazed crimson.

“I think,” he said, his eyelids fluttering, “that we’ve had enough conversation. And I might add that there would be no conversation had you read the textbook and not simply relied on what you had insufficiently learned in high school English classes.”

Silence slammed down like an anvil. “Pass up the tests,” Dr. Z said. “Please.”

Tentatively, Polly, sexy Polly, raised her hand. In a quavering voice, she said, “Dr. Z, look at question 20. I chose *personification*, and it’s marked wrong. Did you make a mistake? *Personification* is the correct answer, isn’t it?”

“The correct answer is *apostrophe*,” Dr. Z said. “Pass up the tests.”

“But isn’t—”

“There is no mistake. Let’s have the tests.”

Polly bit her lower lip and sat back in her desk. She seemed to disappear.

I remembered pondering question 20 the previous week: “John Keats’s ode, ‘To Autumn,’ is an example of which literary device? A) Metaphor B) Simile C) Personification D) Apostrophe

From that tedious textbook, I’d learned a new meaning of the word *apostrophe*, the literary meaning, not the grammatical one. *Apostrophe* was a literary work addressed to someone or something not present.

“To Autumn” was definitely addressed to a season of the year, a bountiful one according to Keats. But I also remembered an image from the poem that depicted Autumn drowsing and dreaming, “sitting carelessly on the granary floor.” Within the ode there was plenty of personification. And for that matter, wasn’t personification a kind of metaphorical language? Perhaps *metaphor* could be correct.

I raised my hand. Dr. Z looked my way, his chin jutting out.

“Yes?”

“I remember puzzling over question 20,” I said. “I see why Polly answered *personification* instead of *apostrophe*.”

Dr. Z swiveled to face me full on, and it wasn’t to hear my reasoning. “Did you answer the question correctly?”

“I did.”

“Then keep your mouth shut.”

Dr. Z’s swift rebuke was a finger poke in the eye. Inside, I winced, reeling, my confidence flattened.



Nothing from that class after the midterm exam do I remember, except that the atmosphere of sharing and support we'd developed was not the same. Why did Dr. Z give that picky, multiple choice test that was such a departure from the humanistic endeavor of reading literature, of risking embarrassment as we sought to make words accessible

and moving by reading them aloud? Why didn't he invite our reasoning? Why did he refuse to acknowledge the ambiguity of some of the questions? When challenged, even politely, Dr. Z had been petty and short tempered, not cultivated and considerate. I began to see his tailored suits as armor, his speech pretentious, his manner condescending.

The test, I think, was clearly meant to add rigor to Oral Interpretation II, to eliminate subjectivity, to establish right and wrong answers, to add objectivity to a course that required students to be vulnerable and empathetic, qualities that made it unlike most university courses.

I confess that in my long teaching career in both high school and college, I've given tests I thought added needed rigor to a course. And I remember feeling besieged when students questioned clumsy, ambiguous questions I'd fashioned. I became impatient. I knew when students had valid complaints, but I feared appearing weak and incompetent. Instead of seeking to understand students' concerns, I hardened my stance and became authoritarian.

Besides his defensiveness and rising anger, I don't know what else Dr. Z may have felt that day. Did he realize that some of the questions were ambiguous and amend them in the future? Did he dispense with the multiple choice test altogether? Perhaps the test was used department-wide. Did he talk to colleagues who also taught the course? Or did Dr. Z, in fact, lack humility, a quality he seemed to demonstrate when trying to keep Michael from dropping the class?



The second verse of Whitman's "A Noiseless, Patient Spider" ends like this:

And you O my soul where you stand . . .  
 Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,  
 Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,  
 Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,  
 Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

When I've been my best as a teacher, I've been authentic, curious, vulnerable. I've been open and inviting. I haven't been guarded, protective of my intellect and methods. I haven't bristled when questioned. The filaments I try to send forth are knowledge, preparedness, and humanity. I don't hold back in offering what I have (I do have an ego). But I try to be ever aware of my own fallibility, the gaps in my knowledge, my capacity for misjudgment.

When I'm at my best as a teacher, I create an atmosphere that invites students to venture thinking, to speculate, to launch their own filaments. I want them to question me and their classmates. I want them to question themselves. If they do all that, I know they will accomplish what they might not even imagine. I know they will grow and develop. And I'll know I've taught well. Unlike Michael, they will know that they can.