

My Own Private Ithaca: *Mens*, Mentor, and My Stumble into the Classics

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I am an accidental Latin teacher.

By that I don't mean that my existence is somehow questionable. I mean that, although perhaps logical at each step along the way, the path to my being here and speaking to you now is idiosyncratic to the point that, had I not lived it, I would have doubted its likelihood myself. Yet here I sit, tasked with speaking about mentorship in classical education. I do not intend to revolutionize the way that educational mentorship is thought of, since my own experience in the Classics world is still in its infancy. I feel that the best I can do is to tell you my story, and hopefully along the way, share some of the truths that I have learned in the process.

I graduated from The Colorado College in 2011 with a degree in Political Science and English. Although I studied some classical literature, particularly Homer, I left college fairly ignorant of the ancient world. After graduating, I spent a year in Chicago doing college prep with bright kids from rough neighborhoods. That year, my involvement with the classics was limited, at best; much of my job involved event planning and volunteer coordinating. The students at my school were wonderful, but I wanted to be in a classroom full-time, so after one year I decided to look for something new.

In the fall of 2012, I took a position in Colorado Springs at the Thomas MacLaren School. MacLaren is a public charter school, and its curricular focus is very much in line with traditional great books programs. Several things about teaching at MacLaren are unusual; first, the whole faculty shares one office. I was leery of this arrangement initially, since I often prefer solitude and like to prepare my lessons on my own, not packed like a sardine into a room full of grammarians plotting their lessons while humming and crunching on granola bars. But the culture of the faculty as a whole has consistently functioned to preserve a peaceful working environment. Instead of being ostracized as the "new guy," I was immediately welcomed into the faculty room. Second, and more pertinently, the faculty and administration

at MacLaren consistently place a great deal of focus on establishing a productive culture within the walls of our school. To that end, the faculty are presented not just as teachers, but as lifelong learners. We like to say that our school is dedicated to the good, the true, and the beautiful. It's one thing to say that phrase, but something else entirely to live what it means over three years; in my time at MacLaren, I have become convinced that the only reason twenty-seven highly opinionated people can share a noisy faculty room without wanting to kill each other daily is that we are all genuinely interested, not in gossip, but in ideas and ideals that are truly worth pursuing. Last year, for example, the whole faculty read Dante's *Inferno* and conducted a series of seminars. This isn't just our "professional development"; this is an integral part of how we interact on a daily basis.

Perhaps as a result of this faculty culture, every summer since I've been back in Colorado I've set a particular goal for myself to accomplish—kind of a flexibly-enforced project of self-improvement. Two years ago, for instance, I read a book per week for the duration of break. Somewhere around May of 2014, while I thought about what my new project would be, an idea struck me at the best possible time—over a beer. I go to a pub trivia contest once a week, and several of my teammates over the past couple of years have been Colorado College professors, including Dr. Daniel Leon. This particular night, Dan mentioned that he was teaching a Latin I course over the summer, along with Kendra Henry. After some discussion, Dan agreed to let me audit the class.

This is where my life started to get a little bit weird. The first day of classes also happened to be my last day of work for the school year, so my head of school needed to approve of my missing meetings to attend class. No luck on missing meetings, but "Ben," she said, "if you're taking Latin this summer, how do you feel about teaching it in the fall?" I was somewhat taken aback by this, but as I said before, this is a close-knit faculty. If my head of school needed me to teach Latin, then a Latin teacher she would get. The class thus became less of a summer "project" and more of a summer "learn an entire language with some level of mastery so that letting you teach 6th graders won't be a huge mistake." Less than two months after starting my own Latin studies, I stepped into my classroom as the teacher instead of the student. Thankfully, I had the guidance of our two resident Latinists at MacLaren to help me continue to learn and to pass along this language to my students. (An aside—on a faculty of twenty-seven, we have six Latin teachers. It is an unusual school.)

Over the past twelve months, I have had some time to reflect on what it means to be both a teacher and a student, or, to use the more formal terms, a mentor and a mentee. In fact, before I even go on, I'd like to take a moment to analyze that term "mentor" itself. Its earliest usage, of course, refers to Homer's Mentor, the grizzled old adviser to Telemachus, and the temporary avatar for Athena on Ithaca. Athena, though she clearly knows exactly what has happened to Odysseus, does not tell the young man; rather, she encourages Telemachus to venture and to discover for himself. The role of Mentor here is not simply empty words. Telemachus must learn not by hearing, but by doing.

Since I've spent the last ten months or so speed-learning Latin, it's also very difficult for me not to think of the word "mentor" in a manner reminiscent of *mens, mentis* in that language. The English word "mind" is fairly apparent here, as is the word's association with the MENSA organization. I think both of these connections are appropriate. Isn't, after all, one main role of a mentor to communicate knowledge? to improve the student's mental capabilities? However, I also want to emphasize another connotation that *mens, mentis* can have: courage. Like Telemachus setting out in search of truth, all who pursue wisdom possess a certain courage. They are sailing into uncharted waters, and by virtue of the act alone should be commended.

I realize that I'm playing pretty fast and loose with the etymology of "mentor" here. My hope is not to impose some fussy literalism onto the word, but to ask you to remember, when you find yourself in a mentor position, that yours must be an active role. Your task is to welcome your ward into the great conversation you help lead—a conversation that is lofty and worthwhile, and difficult. At its core, the act of mentoring is necessarily an inclusive undertaking. The relationship between mentor and mentee resembles far less that of a master and an apprentice, and more that of a guide and his less-experienced companion. As a teacher, I do not aim to teach students to be exactly like me; rather, I try to help them develop into equals, capable themselves of leading me to a greater understanding of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

I do not, however, place one hundred percent of the responsibility for a successful working relationship on the mentor, not by a long shot. Think for a moment about the thought process involved for a student who truly cares about a subject and has sought out help: first, the student must admit ignorance, which I can attest is not always the easiest thing to do. Second, the student must possess the curios-

ity and passion to improve herself – more on that in a moment. Finally, she must demonstrate that courage of which I spoke earlier; the strength to venture and to risk failure.

I spend a good deal of time answering one question posed to me by students and parents: “Why does this school require students to study Latin?” I have a number of (rote and uninspiring) answers to that question; I could tell them that studying Latin teaches precision and study skills, that it helps in learning other languages, that the study of Latin has a positive correlation with higher test scores, and so on. But these answers have never seemed totally convincing to me, since I had no utilitarian purpose in mind whatsoever when I decided to learn Latin. It just plain seemed like fun, and although teaching it is now part of my job, that’s still how I try to think of it.

When I was a freshman or sophomore in college, one of my advisors told me about a student she had worked with who was struggling. He couldn’t write a cohesive paper to save his life, but he knew baseball inside and out. I mean, he loved the game, went to dozens of games every year, and played for the club team. She told him, “Write about baseball.” And he did. Every essay for the rest of that year was at least tangentially about baseball. Not only did the student receive better grades, but he learned how to write an essay. This is an extreme example, of course; it is easy to be passionate about a game like baseball, which is, even by non-fans, often considered “fun.” But that’s not really the point.

The point is this: it doesn’t matter what a student has passion for. As long as he or she has passion, the roles of both mentor and mentee are clear: the student will strive to improve in the direction of his interests, and the mentor works to ensure that the student is welcomed into the great conversation. Because that passion—that courage, that desire to learn—is an integral part of humanity. So whether you are teaching a student to read Ovid or to write an essay, or simply to be more awake and alive to the world every day, you are helping to bring one more considerate, thoughtful voice to the universe.

It is more clear to me than ever that my work as a student is not over, nor is my understanding of my task as a mentor. In fact, I hope the day never comes where either of those situations occurs—as Heraclitus would remind us, the river of our life is ever-changing, and there is no end to the experiences we can have if we choose to continue stepping into it.

We are bounded only by our temporality. One of my favorite poems is T.S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding.” In it, he gives us this thought:

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

When I read this verse, I am reminded that in the comparatively brief moments of sentience we have, it is our responsibility to venture, to explore and to examine, both within and without ourselves.

I want to leave you with just a few final thoughts.

To the potential mentors (that is to say, all of us): remember that superior knowledge can only take you so far. A student who seeks out your guidance, who asks tough questions, who writes the difficult paper instead of the easy one, who works hard not for the grade but for the process itself has already shown humility, courage, and passion. Make an active effort to engage, to understand, and to empathize with this student. You may be nearing the end of your particular odyssey, but before you set out to plant your oar, take a moment to help another begin her journey.

To the potential students (that is to say, all of us): It is not enough to rely on your teachers, your professors, and your advisors to provide the answers. Like Telemachus, you must seek out your own path to the truth. But if you allow the right person to help you along the way, your own private Ithaca can be brighter than you've ever imagined.

Latin has a particular quotable quality, and since studying Latin is, after all, how I've arrived here, I hope you'll indulge me in closing with one pithy phrase of my own devising:

Mors mentis mors animi est.

The death of the mind, of courage, is the death of the soul.