Postcards from the Edge

JANE TOMPKINS

#1 Dear Fellow Teachers,
What do you do when silence breaks out in your class, the times when you
suddenly forget everything you were going to say, or you ask a question no one
answers, and you sit there wishing you were dead, blush rising from the throat,
face hot, throat clenched?

Last semester when I tried to hand authority over to my students, we had
many such moments. Often we just sat there looking at each other. I nearly
died and so did they.

Yet, living through those silences taught me something. They had a
bonding effect, like living through a war. As a result of this experience, I've
come to think pain and embarrassment are not the worst things for a class. At
least the moments are real. At least everyone feels intensely. At least
everyone is there.
What do you think?

Jane

#2 Poem Postcard

No monuments record the bravery of teachers,
Or tell our conquered fears,
There is no Tomb of the Unknown Teacher,
No surgery for our scars.

All our injuries are internal,
No one counts the pain,
Least of all the teachers,
We go sightless on.

To teach is to be battered
Scrubinized, and drained,
Day after day. We know this.
Still, it is never said.

What it is to be up there
Exposed to the hostile gaze
Will never be told by teachers—
The knowledge is too much.
#3 Dear All-wise, Imagined Mentor [don’t I wish . . .],
My class had suffered together, its members had gotten to know each other, people had taken risks. Something like authenticity had begun to mark the level of exchange. But whenever we tried to talk about literature, authenticity would fly out the window. Our talk seemed forced, desultory.

One day, to break the ice (again), we played Pictionary, a game like charades, only you draw instead of acting. We screamed, jumped up and down, laughed, were intensely quiet. There was total concentration, participation, self-forgetfulness.

Then we switched gears. For the last twenty minutes people read aloud their assignments: what they thought Holden Caulfield did after the end of Catcher in the Rye. Silence descended; it was the living and the dead. This happened over and over. It was as if, given the opportunity to choose between literature and life, or rather, between literature and each other, we chose each other. The class never did learn how to discuss a literary text, though we fell into a habit of reading poetry aloud from time to time.

What could we have done to avoid this quandary? Should it have been avoided?

Wondering, in Durham

#4 [To Parker Palmer, a leader in higher education reform and author of To Know as We Are Known: A Spirituality of Education]
Dear Parker,
When I began paying attention to students, I stopped caring about knowledge. Knowledge, for me, became something “over there upon the shelf,” as in the Dickinson poem:

I cannot live with you
It would be life
And life is over there
Upon the shelf

If knowledge is “over there upon the shelf,” “life” is right in front of me in the classroom, in the faces and bodies of the students. They are life and I want us to share our lives, make something together, for as long as the course lasts, and let that be enough.

I think the thing I’m aiming for is a sense of the classroom as sacramental. The class becomes the end and aim of education. Not something learned that you can take away from the class, not a skill, or even a perspective on the world. But an experience worth having as it goes by, moment by moment. I’m really looking for somebody to give me permission to think these things. Will you do it?

Love,
Jane
Dear Students,
When I pay attention to the subject matter in class, instead of to you, I get excited, think of an idea that just has to be said, blurt it out, and, more often than not, kill something. As in the Dickinson poem ("My life had stood / A loaded gun / In corners"), when I speak the report is so loud it deafens. No one can hear anything but what I've said. Discussion dies. It seems it's either you or me, my authority or your power to speak. What do I do that shuts people up? Or is this a false dilemma. Help!

Jane

To I Don't Know Who:
Sometimes the feelings I have toward my students are sexual. I don't mean I have the hots for a particular student. It's more like being in love. You know how, when you're in love or have a crush on somebody, you're always looking forward to the next meeting with desire and trepidation: will he or she be glad to see me? Will he or she be late? Not come at all? Will she or he think I'm smart? Good-looking? A nice person? It's the rollercoaster of love—up one day and down the next—no two classes the same. How soon will we be going steady? Will our love be true? Do you love me like I love you?
Am I the only person who feels this way about teaching?

Wondering, in Durham

[To the Registrar at Duke University, Harry Demik]
Dear Mr. Demik,
Last semester I stopped giving grades in my courses and got into trouble with your office. There were mix-ups regarding both classes, rules against what I was doing, but things got straightened out and I didn't have to give grades. Well, only one grade.
Grades, of course, are judgments—judgments rendered by One Who Knows. The way I teach now, judgment seems inappropriate—judgment of the students by the instructor, or of the instructor by the students, or even of the whole course by all its members. Each class is different; that's part of the point. Each class has its potentialities and its limitations. You do what you can within the situation; you are, collectively, what you are. Each class is a concelebration, a holy communion, of sorts.

To Whom It May Concern:
I cleared a pile of newspapers from the kitchen table in order to write this postcard, but on top of the pile a section on hunger and homelessness caught my eye. There were terrible statistics, such as, "40,000 children die in the world every day from starvation." The lead sentence in one article read: "The longest journey a person can take is the twelve inches from the head to the heart." Who is helping our students to make this journey?

Wondering, in Durham
#9 [Nightmare Postcard]
Dear Professor Tompkins,
I've read your article and I think you are a fraud. Your kind of teaching is what's wrong with this country. With teachers like you, it's no wonder the Japanese are beating us. For example: class discussion. As everybody knows, if you don't control the discussion, the students will ramble, get off on irrelevant topics, and start talking about their personal lives. The class turns into a bull session. The students don't learn anything and it's chaos. The teacher's job is to keep this from happening. What students need is more discipline, not less. You ought to be fired.

Disgusted

#10 Dear Disgusted,
You may be right. But, twisting in my seat, looking away in an agony of frustration, staring down at the desk, and taking deep breaths, I've learned to curb my impulse to correct students. Allowed to meander to its furthest most insignificant trickle, ending in a long moment of emptiness, or allowed to reach a pinnacle of disorderly excited hilarity and confusion, a class discussion can give birth to the moment that changes the destiny of the course. The student too afraid to speak up at any other time will step into that moment of silence; or the giddiness of the atmosphere will produce an insight, a wild metaphorical leap of the imagination on someone's part that crystallizes everything. Then, there's the silence that attends the recognition of an important event.

#11 Dear Jane,
Come on now. You know this guy is on to something, but you're afraid to admit it. You just can't stand preparing for class any more, so you get the students to do it. You can't stand the responsibility of making discussions work, so you opt out. You're really not suited for classroom teaching anymore, so you hand responsibility over to the students as a way of pretending to teach while really doing something else.

#12 To My Internalized Critic:
A class doesn't get to know itself until it has been let go. People's personalities won't be visible, their feelings and opinions won't surface, unless the teacher gets out of the way on a regular basis. You have to be willing to give up your authority, and the sense of identity and prestige that come with it, for the students to be able to feel their own authority. To get out of the students' way, the teacher has to learn how to get out of her own way, to not let her ego call the shots all the time. This is incredibly difficult. But I think it is a true path for a teacher.
#13 Dear C,
Do you remember once we were having a telephone conversation about how busy we were? You were worrying about how you were ever going to finish the critical biography you've been working like a dog on for years; we'd been talking about our families, when suddenly you burst out with: "I don't know what I would do; if my parents should die I wouldn't have time."
I'll never forget that moment, or the sound of your voice.

#14 Dear Friends and Loved Ones,
I would have written you a letter instead of a postcard, but I didn't have time.
I wanted to tell you about my ____________, but I didn't have time.
I would have invited you to dinner, but I didn't have time.
I would have done more reading before writing this paper, but I didn't have time.
We never got to cover the end of the novel; we ran out of time.
I would have read your article more carefully, but I didn't have time.
I didn't have time to read your article.
I wanted to call you, but I was afraid it would take too much time.

In haste,
Jane

#15 Dear I Don't Know Who:
In the classroom we say over and over that there's not enough time to do what we really want. But it's a lie. The following is an excerpt from Mary Rose O'Reilley's article, "Silence and Slow Time: Pedagogies from Inner Space":

Sister Teresa was past her prime, getting eccentric. She was supposed to teach us Art History from Prehistory to the Present. We spent weeks on primitive cave painting, then stalled on Giotto. Day after day, we sat in a dark classroom, looking at the confusion of spears and torches in "The Kiss of Judas"—until we knew it. Knew it. Later, lurking morosely in the positivist pews of Johns Hopkins University, where I read the Gospel of John in first-year Greek, it was Giotto that rose before my eyes. That confusion of spears, and that alone, opened the Greek text to me. Now I knew two things.

This nun having done her work, art stops short for me in the early fourteenth century. Somewhere, filed in some Platonic syllabus, lie Raphael's fat madonnas, but they are not for me: I do not know them. I suppose that is a loss. But I know two things.

(Pre/text 11 [1990]: 136)

#16 Dear Colleagues:
Here's a joke I remember from junior high school, or maybe it was college. A woman went to the doctor and said, "Doctor, I have an enormous desire to eat pancakes. I just can't get enough of them. What can I do?" "Well," said the doctor, "that doesn't sound too serious. How many pancakes are we talking about?" "Oh," said the woman, "at home I have sixteen chests full."

When it comes to knowledge, we are like that woman. At home we have sixteen chests full, and we're dying to get our hands on sixteen more. But since even one cold pancake is too many, why are we doing this?
#17 [To John Orr, my meditation teacher]
Dear John,
I've begun to realize lately that I read as a reflex, to stuff my mind. It's too painful to remain conscious for very long at a time, attention free; even a fraction of the day is too much. So I read or write, talk or listen, watch TV, do a task that requires some degree of concentration; that way I can avoid the unpleasantness of open attention. Mainly it's reading I use to stanch the flow of unwanted mental events.

#18 [To my husband, Stanley Fish, a famous Miltonist]
Dear Stan,
Remember the other day when I wanted you to spend time with me and you said you had to work? I thought of Milton's sonnet on his blindness, and in particular of this line: "God doth not need either man's work or his own gifts." "God doth not need either man's work or his own gifts" I wanted to shout at you. "His state is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed and post o'er land and ocean without rest," so what the fuck are you doing working on your paper?

My whole life I never remembered these lines when I was busy. But still, I hope you take my point.

Love,

Jane

#19 [To the Ford Foundation Scholars at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, juniors preparing to go into college teaching]
Dear Ford Foundation Scholars:
In the PC wars where we fight over whether to teach The Color Purple, or what the First Amendment really means, we forget the weather. People's feelings get hurt; resentments build.

A friend of mine whose marriage was breaking up said to me, "How you deal with the problems that come up in a relationship is more important than what the problems are." It's the same in intellectual life. But we, your professors, do not know how to conduct ourselves when there is real conflict, inside the classroom or out. We fumble around. Sometimes we tear each other apart, or, afraid of doing that, avoid speaking. I for one could use some instruction in how to disagree fruitfully. And in how to listen constructively to an opponent. I wish your generation would learn these skills and then teach us.

Hopefully,

Jane Tompkins
#20 Dear Teachers,
In school, it's students not books that are important. Students are growing, and like other growing things they need the right atmosphere to grow in. The atmosphere is what determines whether or not they will flourish. Of this atmosphere, books are only one part. What about the rest?
Do students get the sunshine of love and attention from their instructors? Do they receive the rain of affection and intimate exchange from one another? Do they have time and space to grow in?

#21 Dear Readers,
I'm now going to abandon the fiction of sending postcards and speak to you in another mode. Reverie.

In my mind's eye I keep seeing rows. Rows of desks, running horizontal across a room, light yellow wood tops, pale beige metal legs, a shallow depression for pencils, maybe, at the far edge, and chairs of the same material, separate from the desks, movable. The windows—tall and running the length of the classroom—are on the right. Light streams through. The rows are empty.

Now the desks darken, and curve. They're made of older grainier wood; they're the kind that come out from the back of the seat on your right and wrap around in front. They're attached to the seat where you sit, which is clamped to the seats on either side or those in front and in back. The desks metamorphose in my mind. Now they are hinged, tops brown and scarred; they open to reveal notebooks, textbooks covered in the shiny green and white book covers of Glen Rock Junior High; there's a bottle of mucilage and a pink eraser. On top, there’s a hole for an inkwell, black and empty. The seat, when you stand, folds up behind.

Sometimes the desks are movable; more often they're clamped down. Always they're in rows. And empty. The teacher's place is empty, too, another desk or table-like thing. Sometimes it's a podium on a platform. The blackboard behind.

The scenes are all mixed together—grade school with graduate school—but always the windows along one side of the room, and always the desks in rows.

After babyhood we spend a lot of time learning to sit in rows. Going from unruly to ruled. Learning to write on pages that are lined. Learning to obey. There is no other way, apparently. Even if the desks were arranged in a circle, or were not desks at all but chairs or ottomans, still they would have to form some pattern. We would have to learn to sit still and listen.

The first part of life goes on for a long time. The habit of learning to sit in rows doesn't leave off when the rows themselves are gone. Having learned to learn the rules, you look for them everywhere you go, to avoid humiliation. You learn to find your seat in the invisible rows.
The last part of life, though, is different. It is no longer automatic, your walking in and sitting down. When you see a row, your gorge rises, or you are simply indifferent. When the command comes to be seated, you don’t obey. All of a sudden, survival no longer depends on getting to your desk in the ten seconds after the buzzer sounds. It’s the other way around. You’d better go while the going’s good. Time to give up the security of rows. ‘Cause you’re not in the classroom any more. There is no blackboard with equations on it, no teacher with a pointer to point out what you need to know. No test, no assignment. No three o’clock when the bell for dismissal rings. No after school. No smell of chalk dust and freshly sharpened pencils, no fragrances of different kinds of paper—grey and white and yellow, blank pages, lined and unlined—inviting you to prove something, yourself: I can do this problem, spell that word, name the capital of that country, explain the meaning of that term. 

Though there was always fear associated with sitting in the rows—Am I too different? Will I pass the test? Does anybody like me?—the desks and chairs and tasks promised escape from fear by giving something definite to do: add the column of figures, learn the causes of the war.

Now, wandering the world outside of school, having transcended “rows,” nothing to do, no place to go, all tasks reduced to different forms of a problem in arithmetic, I am terrified. In the huge dark unfurnished world without rows, I cower and tremble. Give me back Mrs. Colgan. Let me be in 1B again. Let me learn to add, to subtract, to carry and to borrow numbers; give me a problem to do.

I see the light-filled classrooms, rows on rows, desks, chairs, waiting to be filled: let the lesson begin. “Our first assignment will be to learn the periodic table.” Let me back in. Please. Let me sit down again, open my notebook to the first blank page, start writing. When is the exam?

#22 The World as School
I always felt safe in school, comparatively. Though I dreaded failing in any academic pursuit, that very fear spurred me to achieve. There was pleasure and a sense of competence in success. Driven by fear and the desire to define myself, I was an “A” student and teacher’s pet, headed straight for teaching as a profession because school was the place where, although it scared me, I could manage.

What I really couldn’t handle was the uncontrolled world outside the classroom. Where anything could happen. In school the hated rules made things safe. Held in check by force and authority, the other students couldn’t really hurt me. But besides that, outside, there was the emptiness. The long walk home.

I had forgotten about that empty feeling until today. Actually, there were several different feelings, depending on how school had gone. But mainly, the emptiness. A pain not directly acknowledged, just felt. There isn’t much
I can find to say about it except that the sky seemed too blue, the sun too bright, the pavement too sandy-colored, the voices of the children too loud in the park.

The part of the walk I liked best—between the school on 211th St. in Manhattan and my apartment building on 215th St. near Inwood Park—was a little stretch of woods you could cut through instead of going around on the sidewalk just when you got to Seaman Avenue across from the park. The woods were brown and protective in all seasons of the year. Brown dirt path worn smooth and brown tree trunks and brown leaves on the ground. That is how I remember them, friendly brown woods. They sheltered you without isolating—you could still see Seaman Avenue—and when you got there, you knew you were halfway home.

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Read Reader

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