

## A teacher's self-eulogy

JEFFREY BERMAN\*

Jeff Berman's fantasy came true yesterday when his body was found in his office minutes after teaching the final class of the semester. For decades the popular English professor had disclosed to his students that he wanted to expire teaching, dying in harness. The bizarre wish came true. He was eighty-two years old and had been teaching at the University at Albany for fifty-four years, longer than any other faculty member in that institution's history. The news stunned his devoted students, though one expressed the hope that his teacher had submitted final grades in the course before passing on. Administrators also expressed sorrow, but one admitted privately that he thought Berman should have retired years earlier. Upon turning seventy, Jeff boasted that he planned to continue teaching for as long as he received the top teaching evaluations in his department – a statement that a dean, who wished to remain anonymous, believes manipulated students into giving him higher evaluations than he deserved. Few of his colleagues could be reached for comment, since those who were still alive had retired long ago and moved to Florida.

Jeff could never adequately explain to others or to himself his passion for teaching. Throughout his career he believed that his university underappreciated and undercompensated him, yet he also knew that he was getting paid for something he loved to do, and secretly he thought he should have paid his students for the privilege of teaching and being taught by them. Until the death in 2004 of his beloved wife Barbara, whom he met in his college freshman English class in 1963, he believed he was the luckiest person in the world, in love with both his wife and work, twin passions that complemented each other.

Barbara's death profoundly affected Jeff's teaching, and in his memoir *Dying to Teach* he affirmed the power of writing to memorialize loss and work through grief. He did not idealize her, as Clym Yeobright idealizes his mother in Thomas Hardy's novel *The Return of the Native*, in whose death he is implicated. A harsh, vindictive mother who never accepts Clym's marriage to an equally wilful woman, Mrs. Yeobright is rendered into a "sublime saint" by her guilt-ridden son, who has attempted to lock her out of his heart and house and who, in the process, loses his eyesight. Jeff also had problems with his vision and, later in life, with his hearing, but he did not spend the rest of his life preaching his wife's death. He maintained, however, that it was pedagogically appropriate to speak about her when discussing death scenes in literature. An overwhelming majority of his students agreed with him, believing that death education was valuable both academically and psychologically. Hearing him speak about his wife's death, they made comments like, "For the first time in my college career, I was able to relate to my professor on a personal, human level"; "You never spoke like you were above us but as though you were one of us"; "I believe when a professor is able to share not only his personal life, but also his emotions, it helps the students relate to him/her"; "I found that I can learn

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\* University at Albany, English Department, USA.

the basics in any English class but I learn ‘life lessons,’ so to speak, when professors choose to speak about personal experience”. Several students stated that hearing their professor talk about his wife helped them to get to know him better as a person, which in turn motivated them to work harder. They felt a close connection to him as a result of his self-disclosures, and they believed that his candor and openness encouraged these qualities in their own writings.

Jeff’s students described his pedagogy as “teaching from the heart”. “It is fine to teach by the book, but the chance of students relating to literature and finding interest in it is so much less. To teach from the heart requires a lot of courage both by the professor and the students”. The same person believed that Jeff’s self-disclosures “allowed students to be completely free and open within class discussion and in their papers. It was very calming to be able to be open in such a way. It allowed our class to be a support group for one another”. Jeff believed in teaching from the heart and the mind, and, perhaps, the soul, in which he had only a vague belief. He never lost faith in the power of teaching to transform lives, and his students appreciated his confidence in them.

Jeff became identified with the pedagogy of personal writing, and many of his books explored the extent to which teaching based on understanding the other can transform the classroom experience. Unlike most of his colleagues in English studies, who theorized the other without attempting to find out specifically how their students felt about teachers, Jeff was constantly soliciting his students’ reactions to his teaching. His students wrote weekly reader-response diaries in literature courses, and they often filled out anonymous questionnaires at the end of the semester. In addition, he interviewed many of his students months and sometimes years after they completed courses with him.

Few of Jeff’s colleagues shared his enthusiasm for self-disclosing writing. Empathy, which was the cornerstone of his teaching, attracted more interest from psychology professors and psychotherapists than from those in his own discipline. His colleagues’ lack of interest in empathic teaching disappointed him at first, but he welcomed the challenge to develop a pedagogical approach that enabled students to write about vexing life issues. As he wrote at the end of his book *Empathic Teaching*, “I have not discovered anything new; Heinz Kohut and Carl Rogers were tireless advocates of the use of empathy in psychotherapy, and they both recognized its application to education. Other teachers and researchers have investigated the dynamics of self-disclosure in a variety of settings. My contribution is to show how empathy and self-disclosure can be combined safely and productively in the classroom” (374).

Jeff did not believe that personal writing was superior to traditional argumentative writing, based on critique, but he sought to redress the imbalance that favored the latter over the former in academia. Most of the English majors whom he taught told him that he was the first college teacher to allow them to use the first person pronoun when they wrote. As a student remarked, “I have encountered professors who, after I disclosed that I was taking ‘Love and Loss,’ emphatically stated that it was not a professional approach to teaching. More importantly, I was told, it was not appropriate to encourage students to write personally about their lives, as it allowed a professor a more personal interaction with his or her students. It’s not condoned, I was told once, and it creates the risk of overfamiliarity with students. Previous to this course, I would have agreed, but after learning what I have learned, it’s impossible to imagine learning a more valuable lesson. In order to become a better human, I believe now, it’s integral to be able to connect and empathize with people”. Jeff himself did not use “I” until the epilogue of his third book, *Narcissism and the Novel*. He agreed with Gerald Graff that the “opposition between persuasive and creative/personal modes of writing is needlessly overdrawn” (248), and that college teachers should encourage both types of prose.

#### RADICAL AND CONSERVATIVE

Jeff’s teaching was both radical and conservative. His commitment to the self-disclosing classroom and emphasis on “risky writing” were considered not only radical but also dangerous. Few rhetoric and composition scholars endorsed such “risky teaching”. His decision to emphasize the

“basics of writing” – grammar, diction, style, compression, voice, point of view – was perceived as conservative if not reactionary, particularly during an age in which rhetoric and composition were influenced heavily by cultural studies, with its implicitly Marxist bias. As he remarked in *Empathic Teaching*, his emphasis on grammar in writing courses differed from the “bonehead English” courses satirized by Bernard Malamud in his novel *A New Life*, and it also differed from the “back to basics” approach championed by conservative educators such as Allan Bloom, E.D. Hirsch, and Dinesh D’Souza. Instead of writing about their summer vacation, Jeff’s students wrote about being depressed during their summer vacation, or about grieving the loss of a loved one. The knowledge that only their writing skills would be critiqued, not their emotions, enabled students to write openly and truthfully about the most important issues in their lives.

Jeff was radical and conservative in other ways. In the mid 1970s he taught the first psychoanalytic literary course at his university, and he demonstrated in his 1994 book *Diaries to an English Professor* that introspective diary writing was a powerful educational and psychological experience. Many students told him that they learned more about themselves by writing weekly psychoanalytic diaries than by spending months in psychotherapy. Psychoanalytic diary writing was radical not because it demonstrated that writing promotes self-mastery and self-healing – writers have long known this – but because he showed that the teacher did not need to play the role of therapist for students to experience therapeutic relief. Yet at the same time Jeff was conservative, preferring literature to theory, and agreeing with James Hynes’s definition of literature in his satirical academic novel *The Lecturer’s Tale*: “A literary work is any work of imaginative writing – prose, poetry, or drama – that is inherently more *interesting* – rich, complex, mysterious – than anything that can be said *about* it” (24; emphasis in original).

To determine how teachers make a difference in their students’ lives, Jeff kept a folder of unsolicited letters and emails he received over the years. Some former students wrote to him asking for a letter of reference, but most wrote simply to express gratitude for his teaching. The folder grew thick over time, and when he began reading them closely, he discovered that most students saw him in the same way. Students did not praise his originality or brilliance, qualities that he did not see in himself. Nor did they generally refer to his publications, which occupied so much of his time and attention. A few praised the writing and reading skills he taught them, but most appreciated his passion for teaching, which made his courses challenging, and they especially valued his ability to relate literature to life. “Thank you for everything you taught me about Hemingway and Fitzgerald”, wrote one student. “Most of all thank you for teaching me about the quality of being human and humane. I’m a better person because of your teaching”. What they valued most was his interest in their education and his belief in their potential. He was particularly struck when a former student, who had written about his father’s suicide, sent him a letter from graduate school and quoted from a passage that Jeff used in *Empathic Teaching*: “I came across the Henry Adams quote the other day, the one that says, ‘A teacher never knows where their influence really stops,’ but yours definitely has not. I still feel that your class truly helped me to continue to face my situation. Unfortunately, I had a friend take his life this past year. Though it was his third time trying, and we all knew that eventually he would succeed, it is still very hard. But your influence continues with me”.

Jeff’s students saw him as approachable, warm, down-to-earth, and honest. They were not intimidated by his knowledge, fearful of his judgments, or confused by his language. He enjoyed bright students but he also welcomed average students, who sometimes learned the most from his courses. He believed that education was reciprocal. “Many of the ideas that I hold important about teaching were expressed by you during our classes”, wrote one man who desired to be a college professor. “One, at the top of this list, is a teacher must know he or she will learn from their students every day. You knew that”. Another student, who took Jeff’s “Age of Freud” course, wrote that “I remember a different feel in the classroom that I never felt anywhere else. When the course was done, right after the final [exam], I remember everyone taking a moment, one after the other, to come up and shake your hand and say ‘Thank you’ and that was how I knew it was different than any other previous course”.

Jeff's critics, of whom there were many, did not see him in the same way. The reviews of his books were often mixed; those who praised his approach to teaching asserted that not many professors could encourage personal writing without traumatizing their students, and those who criticized his books claimed that he was voyeuristic, narcissistic, and predatory. Jeff was stung by the negative criticisms, but he believed that his students were the most accurate judges of his work.

Jeff often made jokes at his own expense, believing that they helped to make the student/teacher relationship closer to friend/friend. Many of his students later became life-long friends. He knew how to maintain professional boundaries. He did not have affairs with students; did not go drinking with them, as many of his colleagues did; and did not dress like them. Indeed, as he grew older, he was one of the few male teachers who always wore a tie and jacket to class. But he tried to understand his students' lives and published several books containing their life writings. Jeff grew up in the 1960s, when the word "relevance" became the slogan for educational reform, and he urged his students to make connections between their lives and those of the fictional characters discussed in class. He believed in motivating them to do their best work and fulfilling their potential, but he also sympathized with their difficulties and encouraged them to write essays and diaries in which they engaged in problem-solving.

Jeff believed in what Kay Redfield Jamison calls exuberant teaching, in which teachers' joy and passion infect their students, motivating them to do their best work. Throughout his life he loved teaching, but it became increasingly important to him after his wife's death and helped to fill a huge void in his life. As he turned sixty, he read George Steiner's book *Lessons of the Masters*, and he was struck by the three types of pedagogical relationships discussed by the eminent literary critic:

Simplifying, one makes out three principal scenarios or structures of relation. Masters have destroyed their disciples both psychologically and, in rarer cases, physically. They have broken their spirits, consumed their hopes, exploited their dependence and individuality. The domain of the soul has its vampires. In counterpoint, disciples, pupils, apprentices have subverted, betrayed, and ruined their Masters. Again, this drama has both mental and physical attributes... The third category is that of exchange, of an eros of reciprocal trust and, indeed, love... By a process of interaction, of osmosis, the Master learns from his disciple as he teaches him. (2)

Jeff identified with the third pedagogical relationship, based on reciprocal trust and, within professional boundaries, love. He did not regard himself as a Master – he was keenly aware of the deficiency of his education, which was strikingly clear from his unfamiliarity with many of Steiner's wide-ranging literary, philosophical, and religious allusions. (He would have done anything to have Steiner's encyclopedic memory, command of languages, and magisterial prose style.) Nor did he regard his students as disciples – on the contrary, he required his students to disagree, in their essays, with his interpretations of literature. He believed that he learned as much from his students as he hoped they learned from him. He agreed wholeheartedly with Steiner that "there is no craft more privileged" than teaching: "To awaken in another human being powers, dreams beyond one's own; to induce in others a love for that which one loves; to make of one's inward present their future: this is a threefold adventure like no other". For Steiner, and for Jeff, one need not be a Master teacher to reap the rewards of teaching: "Even at a humble level – that of the schoolmaster – to teach, to teach well, is to be accomplice to transcendent possibility" (183-184).

Like most academics, Jeff valued knowledge and wisdom, but he placed the highest worth on goodness. He loved reading about real and fictional characters who sought, with varying degrees of success, to be good. He was fortunate to have been married for thirty-five years to a good woman to whom he was devoted, and who inspired him to do his best. He sought to keep Barbara's memory alive after her death, first by speaking about her to his students, then by writing a book about her, and finally by teaching new courses on death education that allowed him to teach to others what he was himself learning. He taught many thousands of students over a career that spanned more than half a

century, and although he forgot most of their names, he never stopped feeling affection for them, even love. He never taught James Hilton's story *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*, but as he grew older, he identified with the venerable pedagogue, who also lost a beautiful wife to premature death. If Jeff could have bid farewell to his students, it might have sounded like Mr. Chips's valedictory speech to the pupils of Brookfield Academy: "I have thousands of faces in my mind – the faces of boys. If you come and see me again in years to come – as I hope you all will – I shall try to remember those older faces of yours, but it's just possible I shan't be able to – and then some day you'll see me somewhere and I shan't recognize you and you'll say to yourself, 'The old boy does n't remember me.' [Laughter] But I *do* remember you – as you are *now*. That's the point. In my mind you never grow up at all. Never" (89). Jeff's students could tell from his voice, even when he grew old and frail, that his passion for teaching remained, and that Barbara was never far from him.

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