

The Professors of Pacific College: An Appreciation

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I grew up in Fresno and attended Butler Mennonite Brethren Church. Fresno Pacific was the only college my parents would let me attend. Stay for two years, they said, and then go anywhere you want. But I stayed for four years and finished my B.A. in 1989. My reasons for staying were two-fold: first, I met someone I couldn't leave—Kelly Daniel, my wife and musical partner of more than thirty years—and, second, I found myself surrounded by professors who modeled the scholarly life and the interpersonal experience of academia at its most welcoming. Having myself become a professor of music and film history and American culture studies, I recognize the formative influence professors at Pacific had on my writing, teaching, and life as a scholar.

Delbert Wiens and Devon Wiens together taught a two-semester introduction to the ancient world—which at Pacific meant the Greeks, the Romans, the Jews, and the early Christians in one unified tale. Delbert and Devon, scholars of faith who had trained at major universities beyond the Mennonite world, finely tuned their big story about the origins of the West to the place where they did the telling—a college where the Anabaptist tradition still lived. And the story they told felt like it was theirs—the product of creative thought within the frames of historical scholarship delivered in compelling fashion for a room full of freshmen.

Steve Varvis similarly shaped the lectures in his course Renaissance and Reformation around his own evident and energetic struggle to make sense of the past. His students were along for the ride. I remember Steve asking the small class at the end of one lecture if the philosophical story he told that day held together. (The topic, as I recall, was how Renaissance philosophers understood the physics of an arrow's flight.) We said yes—for what, really, did we know? Steve's question invited us to join the conversation his lecture and our primary source readings had started. Slowly moving young scholars into the cross-generational conversation that is humanities scholarship lies at the heart of the patient work of mentoring. (So does close attention to writing: I recall Steve covering my papers in comments and suggested revisions. In similar fashion,

my harpsichord teacher Laurel Huber called into question every single word in my senior thesis.)

The presumption of our readiness to join the scholarly conversation was not Steve's alone. Paul Toews conducted his upper-level classes in similar fashion. Paul's course American Intellectual History was the first place I thought seriously about American culture, a topic that would be central to my work as a scholar. In retrospect, I recognize that Paul taught the class like a graduate seminar: he assigned foundational and innovative works of scholarship, then expected us to talk and write about them without much prompting on his part. In the course of any given class session, Paul had a habit of referring to various books and asking if anyone had read them. His tone was always dead serious—as if he actually thought one of us might have read the books he mentioned. I always wrote down the books Paul named. And once—only once!—Paul mentioned a book I *had* read (Luigi Barzini's *The Italians*: still on my bookshelves today). This small victory suggested to me that I might—someday—catch up on my reading.

Billie Jean Wiebe's Oral Interpretation of Literature course modeled a different but equally passionate rigor aimed at literary texts. Billie Jean regularly situated her knowledge and enthusiasm for the topic in her own graduate education experience at Northwestern. In her example, I came to understand the academy as a rich and varied place, with charismatic professors who were accessible to well-prepared applicants and who could change their students' lives. The scholarly world beyond Pacific was palpably there in Billie Jean's course and her passion for literature opened new ways of thinking.

But no one ushered me into the larger life of the scholar like my philosophy professor, boss, and friend Richard Wiebe. I worked for Richard in the Pacific Bookshop for three years and his example remains my model for the scholarly reading life. The courses and independent studies I did with Richard centered on understanding foundational texts in philosophy and critical theory by talking through their often complex contents. The formal dialogue of Richard's courses flowed into daily life in the bookshop, where topics broadened to current events, novels, and movies. Richard's finely curated shelves formed a secondary reading list: I remember titles by Kundera, Proust, and Barthes among the many I bought then and still have. Richard also stocked the biweekly *New York Review of Books* on the assumption that copies of this general journal of

scholarly life would produce readers. It did: I still read the *NYRB* and experienced a kind of vertigo when one of my own books was reviewed in its pages. Richard and Billie Jean showed me that I could live anywhere and remain connected to the intellectual currents of the day; that the center point of academic and literary culture lies in the text; that reading is all.

Strip all that is inessential away at any college or university and what remains is the faculty. The circle of professors I found at Pacific College in the second half of the 1980s—scholars, mentors, models, and friends—prepared me for a life in academia I was not envisioning at the time. My years at Pacific remain a gift I draw upon every day and I hope to be, for my students, what my professors at Pacific were for me.

