Talk shows

BOB BLAISDELL

More true tales from a city university

[Episode 3, after 'The jockey and his horse' in *ET*75 (Jul 03) and 'Shame' in *ET*76 (Oct 03)]

I WAS EARLY for my interview. It was a hot, early summer afternoon, and I sweated in the English Department office and watched young people of various colors and dress come in to ask about where they could find their spring semester's teachers or grades. By their accents I recognized them as, or believed to be, Russians and Haitians and native Brooklynites, and I really liked this and how they looked. I was excited by the prospect of teaching such students. When I went into the chairman's office for the interview, however, the mature, non-immigrant faces of the committee seemed to tell me that this was a formality, and that they had already hired somebody else. I had had an interview the day before at another college, which had gone well, and that had made me feel cocky until this moment.

Now, the perfunctoriness of the interview here made me feel desperate and I talked a lot. At the drop of a question I was ready to run around with it like a dog with a tennis ball in his mouth playing keep away from its owner. I wasn't going to give up the question until I got tired or they stopped chasing after the answer.

I think it was in response to a question about dealing with students who are not writing well that I first tried the committee's patience.

> "There's this wonderful guy who talks all the time in class – to me – and answers questions or speaks up when I'm in a jam or frustrated, but when he writes – I guess it's wrote, now – when he wrote journals, he wrote in this fake language – rap – in this long, frustrated young male stream of consciousness and he never believed me when I said it wasn't interesting, though eventually, actually, it did get interesting, but when he wrote essays, he wrote in a fake language too – kinda formal and . . ."
>
> "Excuse me," said the robust department chairman. He tossed in his chair and looked annoyed. "Let me put you on pause for a moment. So . . . how do you know it was a 'fake' language when he was writing in rap?"
>
> "How do I know?"
>
> "Yes, how do you know?"
>
> Was he kidding? Was he playing contrary?
>
> I said, amazed, "Because nobody writes like that – nobody talks like that! Michael doesn't talk like that himself. I was trying to get him to write like how he spoke – which was somewhere in between his formal essays, which were kind of dead, and his journals, which were in a second-hand stylized language."
>
> "I don't think we can know that."
>
> "Well . . . but I talked with him. I knew what his voice was."
>
> The chairman rolled his eyes and shook his head.
>
> "Not possible," he concluded.
>
> I didn't push.

In one paper everything had come together for Michael. This was his voice – the one he spoke

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with, the one with which, in class, he was always interesting. It had all his annoyance, too, with the kinds of personal questions I would ask them to answer in their papers:

> If I were on a talk show, the caption under my talking head would be "Considers Himself Boring." There are no intricate details about me that would seem talk-show worthy. I am not homo, trans or bi-sexual. I am straight. I don't cross dress. I have not been abducted by aliens. I don't belong to religious cults. My father is dead. I don't beat my mother, she doesn't beat me. We get along and love each other very much.
>
> I am a 21 year old student who lives in Queens. I have never raped or molested anyone, I was never raped or molested. I never murdered anyone. I don't drink, smoke, or use drugs. I am not anorexic or dyslexic.
>
> I don't attend major social events. I vote. I am not afraid of the outside world. I speak clear and coherent English. I am pro-choice in reference to abortion. I do not dislike animals. I am unemployed. I eat meat and vegetables. I have a slight allergy. I have 20/20 vision. I exercise. I don't watch a lot of television. I don't grade other men or get graded by how many women I sleep with or how many women they sleep with. I read books once in a blue moon. I am technically an American, while my parent and her parents are Guyanese. I don't come from a broken home. My father was an alcoholic. My father did use drugs. My father did hit my mother. I live and breathe Hip-Hop. Not only its music but its culture. I write rap music. I have no brothers or sisters. I am not spoiled. I have a few friends, not a lot. I don't sleep with my mother. I am not homeless. I am not illiterate. I don't freeload or borrow from people. I did not participate in the L.A. riots. I am not in a gang. I have never committed a crime, except for vandalism. I used to write graffiti. I used to get beat up when I was younger. I used to get teased. Kids called me Michelle instead of Michael. My parents never abused me or battered me. I was well disciplined. I don't date white women. I don't live in a racially mixed environment. I have been called nigger. I don't have a driver's license. I have slept with women very much older than me. My life is as plain as it gets. I don't know anyone who fits into the Human Condition in reference to them being strange or weird.

I don't think the chairman would have been impressed, but I'm thrilled by this essay: by its momentum, which becomes almost comical, and, mostly, by its voice.

When I met the chairman three years later, at another interview, he didn't remember me, but a couple of the other committee members did. For some reason, the chairman took a shine to me, and hired me – but we never talked about voice again.

Holding conferences with students in my office doesn't always help, but it usually does, and I feel a connection to them that I haven't had before.

One of the students who had intimidated me in my first semester – teaching English composition in New York City – was Harvey. Young, African-American, he usually spoke loudly and angrily in class, and it was hard to answer him there because he would often not respond to me directly but appeal to the other students and say that if someone couldn't understand what he meant it was because of "various cultural or generational or economic differences."

I scheduled individual conferences before and after classes. One day, an hour or so before class, Harvey came to my office smiling nervously; he was wearing a black baseball cap, gold rimmed glasses, and a red jumpsuit.

> "How you doing?" he said, and he offered his hand.
>
> I shook it.
>
> "Fine, thanks. Have a seat."
>
> "So this is your office you share with a hundred part-time teachers?"
>
> "Yep. Nice, isn't it?" He shook his head as he turned his neck and looked around. "Good thing you're not all here at the same time."
>
> "Yeah. So, you have any questions?"
>
> "Me? Well, not really."
>
> We both thought for a moment. He said, "Okay. I think you're kind of different from my other teachers, right? The things you like, they don't like, and vice versa, if you know what I mean."
>
> "What do you mean?"
>
> He smiled, "Oh, you know. I like to use . . . I have a rather large – extensive, I should say –vocabulary, and I like to . . . utilize it, display it. And you don't go for that. You keep writing… Here, let me see."
>
> He pulled out a folder. Harvey was really organized. He was the only student who typed all of his journals. He had a PC at home.
>
> "Here," he said, reading, quoting my comment on a paper, "'Say it plain, say it simple.'" He shook his head. "To me, that's boring – 'plain . . . simple.'"
>
> "Think of it as 'direct,' then. 'Direct and straightforward.'"
>
> "No," he said, "I know what you mean. That's just not my style."

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I finally liked him. He was, in spite of himself, genial and good-humored, where he had never seemed so to me in class or in his papers. He talked about his family, which had lived in New York for at least three generations, and about how he would like to travel.

I asked, "So where have you traveled?"
"Oh, I've been to Disney World. All the way down there, to Florida. I'd like to travel even beyond that, though. It broadens your mind. I know people who've never been anywhere, lived in New York all their lives and never even been to Jersey."

I laughed out loud a few times at his animated talk, which would make him pause and smile, squinting his eyes at me, before he started up again. He reminded me of my brother.
I never took him so seriously after that, and I was able to write better, more pertinent and critical comments on his papers, which, it seemed to me, were becoming better, more like himself.
Tony was a savvy-looking guy. He was Dominican, and, as with most of the guys, he usually wore a baseball cap. I liked seeing him smile or laugh at my dumb jokes in class, and I liked when, dipping his head and lowering his voice, he would toss out a facetious comment or question. He had a Clark Gable-thin moustache. When he came to my office, he walked in looking at his watch.
"I'm late?" he said.
I looked at my watch. "A minute."
"Sorry," he said, smiling. "I try to be prompt. But, you know, you're all the way up here at the top of the building, it threw off my calculations."
I asked if he had any questions and he said no, he didn't.
"Well, here," I said, "I've got a paper of yours."
He nodded, taking it. "B plus, huh?" He stuck out his lower lip. "Not bad, I guess."
"No. Your writing's pretty good."
"Thanks."
The paper was about one of his teachers in high school, and how that teacher had helped him get interested in school.
I asked, "What other classes are you taking here?"
"Here?" He shrugged, "Well, besides your class, and sociology, and accounting, nothing much."
"Sounds like a lot. Do you have to work, besides school, I mean?"
"I don't got to, but I do. A little, hm-hm."
"What do you do?"
"Stuff, soldering stuff, making stuff."
"Making like what?"
"Kinda jewelry. I make earrings, kinda."
"Yeah?"
"Yeah. It's a job."
"How'd you get into that?"
"My sister, my mother work at the same place. I work with my hands. I'm good at it."
"And that teacher you write about, he was an art teacher?"
"Yeah, that's right."
"There are no art classes here?"
"Could be. I guess there are."
"You're not taking any?"
"Here? – Well, kinda."
He didn't want to admit taking art classes, just as he hadn't wanted to admit to making earrings. I guessed that he had been made to feel that these were not properly masculine pursuits (and somehow he had managed to persist in them anyway).
"So which art class? My wife's an artist, besides working, and she's looking for classes …"
"Hm. – Yeah, well, sculpture."
"How's that?"
"Not too good – not too bad. We make stuff." He smiled, and then, laughing, "At my old school, my high school, that teacher, he let us experiment, you know, with materials – marble, cement, blow-torches, iron . . . lots of stuff. Anything, everything – within reason, of course. That was great. Here, I don't know what his trip is, because last week," and he shook his head, smiling, "we used, like, toothpicks and frozen peas. How do you like that? I see his point, you know, making something out of basic materials . . . weird materials, but simple and cheap, and using those to help you think about other ones. – Yeah, it's okay. So, your wife, she's an artist?"
"She's a scientist, but she likes to paint, draw."
"A scientist?" he said smiling. "Yeah," he winked, "I like smart women, too."
I was seeing several students that day. The door opened and there was Xi Shen, trembling, so nervous she seemed about to burst into tears. Tony nodded to her, and said, "Hello."
She peeped some reply.
Tony got up. To me he said, "A pleasure, professor."
"Yeah."
He offered his hand and I shook it, then he tipped his cap and left.
After asking Xi Shen to sit down I tried not to look too directly at her.
"That last paper you wrote was good," I said.
She shook her head.
"Yeah. – This one." I pulled the handwritten, marked-over essay from one of my folders. "It's really good. You're being bolder and it makes your English better."
She took the paper, her eyes watery.

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I reassured her, "It's very good."
She read through the paper to the grade, a B plus, and she gained a little heart.
"You have any questions, Xi Shen?"
She shook her head without lifting her eyes to mine.
"How about if we go over this paper, then? There are little mistakes or things I can't understand and maybe we can figure them out. I can't tell if my corrections make sense to you."
She bowed her head further and handed me back the paper. This is how her paper went:
If I were on a daytime television talk show, I would talk about my boyfriends. Poon was the first one who I fell in love with. I met him not long after I arrived in New York. At first I didn't like him, but he called me every day and night, telling me a lot of things that I didn't know. Everything about himself and his family. Generally, I felt we had a lot in common. Although he wasn't handsome and rich, I felt more safe when we got together. Also I fell in love at the time. My family was against me dating with Poon. My parents said that his family was not in America and he wasn't a resident of New York. I would have many problems with him. I still got together with Poon. Two years later, Poon asked me to marry him. And he wanted me to go back to Hong Kong and live with his family after we got married. I said no to him, I also asked him to stay in New York. He refused. I was disappointed that he abandoned me to go back to Hong Kong. I wondered why he was selfish. After that, I wondered why I couldn't find another man who I loved. God couldn't give another chance to me.
My friend introduced a four eyes guy to me when she knew I was broken up with Poon. I know the four eyes guy loved me more than I loved him. My parents said if you married a guy who loves you more than you love him, you will have a good marriage in the future.
I didn't know if it was fortunate or unfortunate. When I decided to marry the four eyes guy, since I was broken up with Poon, I thought I didn't get another chance to love people. Then when I saw Frank, I loved him. Since I was broken up with Poon, I thought I didn't get another chance to love people. My parents didn't want me to get alone with Frank. They always said he will hurt me in the future. I don't know how to decide and to choose between them.
I know I don't love four eyes guy any more, but my mother said he will give me a good life. On the other hand, I love Frank a lot and also I am thinking of him every minute, but I am scared he will hurt me after marriage. I feel a very big headache to decide. I wish god only gave me only one in my life.
That, anyway, is the smoothed out version.
"I'm confused about . . . the four-eyes guy. What's his name?"
"Tom."
"Yeah, okay. So he's got glasses."
"Yes."
"You should use his name somewhere, because it's a little confusing here, where you say that you've fallen in love with Frank. At first I thought Frank was the four-eyes guy. By the way, 'four eyes' is … not a compliment. You should say 'the guy with glasses' and also his name somewhere."
"Frank not four-eyes guy."
"I know, but I had to figure that out. You always need to make it easy for your reader. Be simple."
"Yeah."
I pointed out mistakes ("I met he"; "telling me a lot of things that I wasn't know") and idioms ("Generally, I felt we had most common things").
"This," I said, pointing out "most common things", "is more like . . . 'a lot of things in common.'"
"Most things common."
"Or 'much in common.' That's just the phrase, the English idiom. Is that, anyway, what you mean?"
"Yeah, I think so."
"I think so, too. The end is very touching." I caught her eye; I touched my chest.
"Very sad," she said.
"It's a big problem, yes. But you describe it really well."
She nodded.
I nodded.
Someone knocked on the door. I said, "Excuse me," and I got up and opened it.
"Hi, Dareen."
"Hi.—It's time?"
"Yeah, come in. I'm just finishing with Xi Shen, but come sit down."
Xi Shen was trembling again, and she hastily put away the paper in a folder and into her pack. She got up. She looked frightened. "Goodbye."
"Okay. You don't have any questions?"
She shook her head.
"Okay. Bye. Thank you for coming."
Dareen nodded at Xi Shen. "Hi."
Xi Shen nodded, blushing, and went out the door.
Dareen said, "She seems nice."
"Nice and very shy."
Dareen shook her head. "I'm glad I'm not shy."
Dareen was a breeze. She was friendly, intelligent, pleasant – a model student, except that what she wrote was boring. ■

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