
More Radical, More Gentle, More Delighted

SARAH GETCHELL

When we were with Michael in class, we were often our most childish selves and our most erudite selves. We were a group of eager and brave children who forgot the adult skins we inhabited as we climbed up the ladder to the moon. We felt safe making comments about how the cities in *Invisible Cities*, when plotted, form a perfect sine curve (this was an actual comment made in my Calvino class, to which Michael replied, ‘well, I’m afraid you’ve lost me entirely, but I find this very interesting’), or scratching our bug bites while answering a question, or spinning because it just felt right while portraying the mystical and voluptuous Mrs Vhd Vhd in a skit. We were freed from concerns about impressing the unimpressible or creating a failed work, and were therefore able to reach higher creative and analytical pinnacles than we thought possible, in a way that often seemed effortless (or ‘light’ as Calvino might say) because we weren’t driven to achieve by fear, or by the desire for an A. Michael gave us this environment, and this way of living, teaching, and valuing the beauty of art and the beauty of humans, and he didn’t do it by being undiscerning, but by tempering discernment with love, humor, and delight.

I knew Michael as the gentle, powerful, and glowing teacher of the Calvino and Beckett course that I took in 2014, my final year as a Bread Loaf student, but I also knew him as a neighbor who allowed me to escort him on occasion to dinner or to pond readings [1], as a committed audience member at Blue Parlor, as the teller of stories around a bonfire, as a witty and highly responsive pen pal, as a Bridgeman-porch confidante, and as a nearly mythical figure whose elevated status paradoxically came from his ability to elevate *us*. He made us realize that we are *all* creators and that this, both Bread Loaf and Earth, is the setting for our own epic journey of art, literature, and experience.

I’ve heard professors speak about the fact that one of the things that makes professing at Bread Loaf so special is the awareness that many of their students are also teachers, which means that the experiences in Bread Loaf classrooms have exponential effects in classrooms across the country and world.

In my research for this speech I got to follow some of the echoes of Michael's impact, and I received gorgeous emails, letters, and Facebook messages about the superlatively significant changes Michael made in the lives of his students and in the lives of his students' students, and even, in one case, his student's student's students. I'm going to share some of these with you now.

Noam Osband wrote this:

I never spoke to him until 2009. I was convinced he was a very stern Englishman and uptight which is so absurd if you knew him. The summer of 2009, I was taking Dixie's multimedia class. I was doing a project on digital literacy and I interviewed him on camera for it. We asked him what he thought of text-speak and new modes of communication that come with the phone. I was so sure he was going to be sour about them. Instead, he immediately responded, 'I find this tremendously exciting' explaining that it gave kids new ways of expressing themselves. I've never forgotten that. I hope I'm as intrepid with technology when I'm his age.

Amy Lafty wrote this:

There is a lot I could talk about when it comes to Michael, but I'll leave you with this – a few weeks ago my four year old son graduated from pre-k and received the imagination award. My heart beamed, I closed my eyes, and thought – I would give anything to share this with Michael.

Claire Brislin said this:

One of the most impactful things about Michael was his belief that EVERYONE is a creative being, that this is our essence. His absolute, unquestioning belief in this was incredibly powerful.

Himali Soin assigned Michael the strange and wonderful superlative, 'most likely to be a ghost or a fairy, or maybe a radiant photon entangled in some cosmic current flying all around us, his feelings giving him form in the afterlife.'

Ben Courchesne messaged this:

Michael's classes were always platforms for his students. Michael told us that Calvino told us that 'every story has a magic object,' something that unlocks or advances or reveals a relationship between characters or between a character and the world. I remember Annie's gold spider necklace and Will's 'No one likes Kant' necklace, Kieran's stuffed rabbit (Bufford), etc. I remember Michael describing in a small, soft voice his fancy Italian coffee maker he could not live without.

Like these other former students of Michael's, I find it impossible to sum up the impact that Michael has had on me as a person and as an educator but I'm going to try, right now.

I teach at a private school in Cambridge, Massachusetts where many students go on to top-ranked universities and where students approach school in a very goal-oriented, professional, and often joyless manner (they are quite self-aware and will tell you this themselves). Each year, I begin my core classes with Michael's wonderful essay 'The Pedagogy of the Imagination', which includes Michael's critical analysis of the work of an eight-year-old from a public school in Lawrence, MA, a town very near Cambridge but of which many of my students have never heard. Some of my students are initially angered and threatened by the use of the word 'literature' to describe the work of an eight-year-old. But by the end of the year Michael's lesson has reached them, and they let me know that his words empower them to be 'real writers', to be both more playful and more serious about their work, and to value the works of others, even those outside the canon, even the voices of children, more highly.

Michael allowed one of my former students who was struggling with drug addiction to sit in on a class. The discussion of 'The Cheese Museum' chapter from Calvino's novel *Mr. Palomar* had such an impact on this young man that he enrolled in community college English courses and, when he learned that they weren't going to read literature in the courses, had a private meeting with a professor about the transformative effects of reading together. When asked, my former student suggested Calvino as the first author that they should read.

I think that Michael's greatest gift to me was the revelation that the love of literature and equality go hand in hand, that human lives need to be narrated, and that narration can give voice to the voiceless, even the voiceless dead.

Last summer, when the Andover Bread Loaf folks were visiting, Michael strongly and publicly stated that private schools should not exist. This comment opened up a dialogue between us about equity and access to education that lasted into the winter. In January, I wrote to him about a debate that took place at an international competition that I was judging in which private school students from around the world had to defend or refute the resolution: 'All private schools should be abolished and banned'. I also told him, offhandedly in the same email, that one of the students in my junior class had purchased a pair of 'distance of the moon' socks after we read Calvino together. He gave me a thoughtful response about the international debate, but told me that his favorite part of my message to him was the part about the socks. Michael taught me that it is not only possible, but imperative, that we continue to wrestle with impossibly complex issues of social inequality while retaining the emotional space and lightness to be delighted by a pair of socks.

When I introduced Michael at a pond reading last year, I said that he brings us closer to the moon, but this is not entirely accurate. I think, more rightly, he makes (yes, present tense, *makes*) us look at pieces of granite *right here* like moon rocks, and at each other like the miraculous and bizarre characters in a Calvino story, each infinitely interesting, each worth the risk of an impossible leap to the moon, each as valuable as the next. Thank you Michael, for making me, and so many others, more radical, more gentle, and more delighted.

Note

- [1] An explanation of a Bread Loaf ‘pond reading’: each Thursday evening at the Bread Loaf School of English, students gather around a campfire to hear a surprise faculty member present a poem, story, song, or performance. Particular groups of students are responsible for preparing for each reading and recruiting a professor to take part. Each summer Michael came prepared with things to read in case he was asked. In his last summer at Bread Loaf (2015) we asked him to read at the first pond reading and I had the pleasure of introducing him. He read ‘The Aquatic Uncle’ by Italo Calvino (and maybe one or two other pieces) and it rained a little bit. No one moved and no one complained about the rain, including Michael. New students said that it was a magical introduction to this weekly Bread Loaf tradition.

SARAH GETCHELL is a graduate of Colby College and the University of Michigan Law School. She earned her Master’s degree in English from the Bread Loaf School of English at Middlebury College in 2014 and worked at Bread Loaf as the editor of its daily newspaper, *The Crumb*, in 2015. Sarah teaches English literature and creative writing at an independent school in Cambridge, MA, USA, and is also a poet and an educational activist. *Correspondence:* sarah.getchell@gmail.com