

First Person:

A lifetime of learning

Editor's Note: William Lychack '88 is the author of a novel, The Wasp Eater, and a forthcoming collection of stories, The Architect of Flowers. He is the writer-in-residence at Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., and on the faculty of Lesley University's MFA Creative Writing Program.

▶IF IT'S TRUE, AS SAUL BELLOW said, that writers are readers moved to emulation, then surely teachers are students moved by a similar compulsion. I shudder to think where I'd be without Blanche, or Charlie, or Mr. Reiss, Ms. Forbath, Mr. Woody. Not a day goes by that I don't think of some teacher or another, and still I can't recall with confidence a single thing that even my best instructors taught me, except, perhaps, how to be in the world.

Maybe that was the greatest service they performed. The most affecting teachers seemed to exist as models for a kind of process — the process of being an artist or scholar, that strange and beguiling process of becoming oneself. The most gifted teachers seemed models for persistence and passion, their teaching a natural extension of some devotion, their classes a means of affirmation, a way of fueling some enthusiasm as they paid the bills.

This distinction was never lost on us as students: Our most engaged and engaging

instructors might want to teach, but they needed to do their art or science or philosophy. We sniffed for this authenticity — it's what we gossiped about as students — how certain teachers stood like sources of light to us, nothing tired or stuffy about their classrooms, teaching being part of their artistic or intellectual method, each hour almost sacred to them, all of us becoming fellow travelers on this epic journey. How could one not wish to emulate such a life?

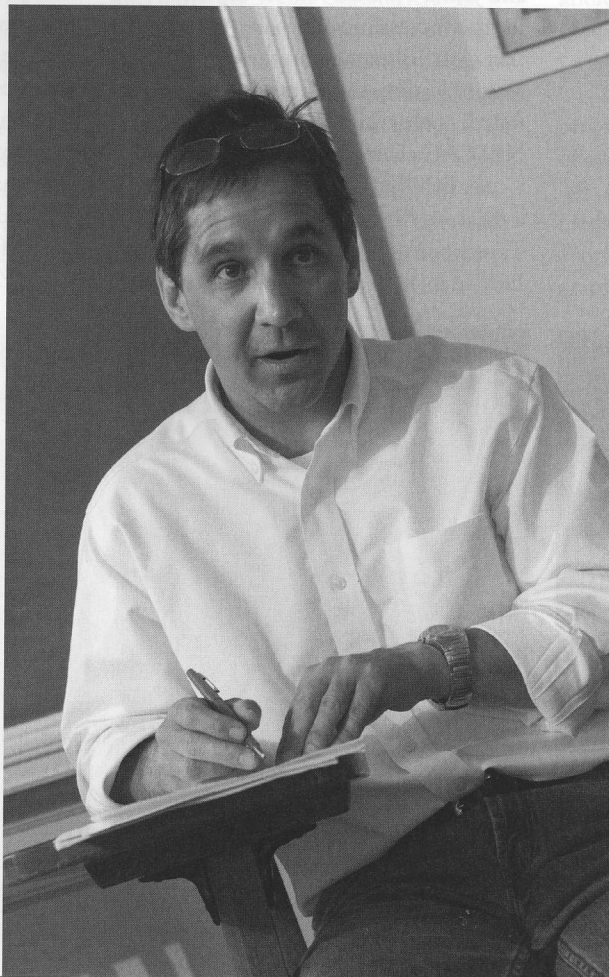
And on my best days, I find no

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way to separate my life as a student from my life as a writer from my life as a teacher. The truth is I'm not sure I can teach anyone how to write, but I can show someone how to love to write. As I often remind my students — and myself — I never want to say anything in our class that I cannot apply to my own work. I preach honesty and clarity and empathy, because I struggle to find such qualities for my own writing and teaching. I push us toward generosity and candor, just as I hope my friends and editors will approach my writing. I tell my students to be uncompromising and selfish about their own work, just as I remind them to be open-minded and selfless about the work of their peers. In the end I want them to somehow coax the best out of each other, just as I need them to somehow coax the best out of me.

And when we lose our way, as we sometimes will, it's back to those original stars to whom we attach our little wagons: our mentors, our permission-givers, those exemplars who admonished us to work, and to keep working, those teachers who showed us how to care about things, and how to keep caring about them. In order to teach such a thing, I believe one must keep learning it.



WILLIAM LYCHACK '88 AT WORK IN THE CLASSROOM AT PHILLIPS ACADEMY.