

“Meet me in the parking lot at 6pm on Saturday,” Mrs. Volk told me after class on a Friday afternoon in 1976. Now, if you knew Mrs. Volk, you knew this was more than a simple request. You didn’t even consider not showing up, and you certainly knew to be punctual. And when I showed up fifteen minutes early that Saturday, I discovered Alan Murray waiting in the Truman parking lot, too. Neither of us knew why we had been summoned, and our curiosity was palpable. At exactly 6pm, Mrs. Volk pulled up in her Volkswagon Beetle, told us to hop in, and then proceeded to drive us down to the Fisher Theatre in Detroit. There, Mrs. Volk introduced us to Emily Dickinson, who was played by Julie Harris in Luce’s production of *The Belle of Amherst*. We witnessed theatrical magic that night, breathing in this one woman show that captivated us for over two hours. Thus began my lifelong love affair with Emily, the world of theatre, and the power of language through poetry. All because of Mrs. Volk’s generosity and her desire to share her passion for poetry and the theatre with Alan and me.

There was Mr. Horst, too, who guided so many of through debate and forensics, helping us embrace the sound of our own voice as valuable and perhaps even necessary. My best buddy Diana Hrabowecki created her own brand of memorable magic developing her voice through Children’s Storytelling. I entered the world of Serious Interpretive Reading, delving into all manner of poetry, prose, and drama, to construct 5 to 8 ½ minute readings for Saturday tournaments. Diana and I often spent Friday nights together, rehearsing for the crack-of-dawn bus that would take us to Saturday competitions hours away. Being a novice poet at the time, I would occasionally insert my own writings when sharing new readings with Mr. Horst. I did this not because I wanted to read my poetry at the tournaments, but because I wanted an honest opinion of the adolescent musings in my notebook – and Mr. Horst always delivered. I could count on his honesty and expertise as he helped me develop the best possible scripts for upcoming contests. When he actually suggested including one of my own poems I had anonymously slipped into the mix, I felt like flying. Further, Mr. Rick Horst taught me the value of speaking truth to power. In our wall-less high school, with agoras that went on forever with only file cabinets dividing

classrooms, our forensics class was inappropriately noisy for that space. Instead of silencing our emerging artistry, Mr. Horst quietly asked Ed Culp to practice his Storytelling script with the class – standing on top of a table. Within seconds, the entire agora was captured by Ed’s many voices, with all desks turned toward our classroom. Applause erupted for Ed’s performance, along with a standing ovation from the entire agora. The very next day, we were given our own self-enclosed classroom, which is what Mr. Horst’s endgame was at the time. Speaking truth to power.

And then there was Mr. Drees, whose ability to create perfect circles the height of the chalkboard mesmerized us on Day One of Honors Geometry class. He introduced us to postulates, which he told us were “givens” and that we should simply accept them as true. They would be used to construct proofs as the course progressed. Being the skeptical human I am, I immediately went home and tried to “prove” each of the postulates. I drew pictures of lines and points intersecting, of corners of walls where planes intersected. Suffice to say, I could not “prove” any of the postulates, and I ended up pitching my geometry book across my bedroom floor. The next morning, I met with Mr. Dress, handed him my broken textbook, and told him that I needed to be transferred out of his class immediately. Wondering why I was requesting this, I told him of my foray and failure into proving postulates the night before. “Are you worried about your grade in this class?” he asked me. A resounding yes. “I’ll tell you what,” he said. “If you decide to stay in this class, I guarantee that you will not earn less than a B.” So, I proceeded to ask him... if I don’t do any homework and fail every test, would you still give me a B? A resounding yes. So, I stayed. Mr. Drees gave me perhaps the very best gift of my education at Truman High – the willingness to take on something challenging and difficult, without fear of failure. He removed the looming threat of the grade and, as a result, my mind was liberated to truly think and begin to understand a subject area that was exceedingly difficult for me.

Then there was Mr. Ed Rima, who handed me a tenor saxophone and told me to sit down and play. The forth tenor had quit Jazz Band, and he was in need of a replacement. “The fingering is very similar

to flute fingerings, so just sit down and play,” he told me. I’d played around with a clarinet reed the summer after 4th grade, when my band friends taught each other our instruments. But I had never taken on a saxophone reed. Suddenly, I was a member of the Truman Jazz Band, sitting there in fear that he would point at me to improvise a solo. I kept hoping he would point at MaryKay Jackson, who was marvelously proficient on alto sax. I was undeniably relieved when she took over my whole-note improvisations, following the chord progression. Further, when in Mr. Rima’s Music Theory class, he would bring in records to instruct us in unfamiliar classical music. The records were incredibly scarred and scruffy, with the music barely audible. When we complained, Mr. Rima calmly told us to “listen for the music between the scratches.” A lesson in patience, discernment, and ferreting through to discover what really mattered.

Mr. Kendrick, the trigonometry teacher, offered a lesson in what really matters, too. By the time I hit second semester of my senior year, I suffered from terrible senioritis, mainly in the math department. I remember telling him that trig will have nothing whatsoever to do with my life after high school. When I told him I was planning to major in music in college, he agreed that trig was probably not going to play much of a role in my life. He had also noticed that other students in the class often handed me their essays, surreptitiously of course, for Mrs. Volk’s class – to read and comment on, in their hopes of earning a higher grade. Mr. Hendricks knew I was in my element reading and commenting on papers, offering kind and constructive criticism; as a result, he told me that I could spend the rest of the semester offering students help with their essays. Knowing I was concentrating and working hard to help others, he promised me an “A” in trig, if I would just show up every morning and hunker down with literary essays of my peers. A win-win for everyone involved.

Speaking of Mrs. Volk, I remember one Homecoming Game Day in the English Agora when absolutely no one was trying to hold classes. Everyone was focused on the game that evening, which buses would be overturned in the parking lot, speculation on who might streak at the pep assembly, etc..., and

teachers simply caved on trying to teach that day. Not Mrs. Volk. She continued to have us scootch our desks into an intimate circle, continued to conduct class amidst all the chaos. “Isn’t it exciting to know that we are the only people in this building learning anything today?” she asked. I remember thinking Yes! Yes! Yes! I leaned in, wanting more of the literary wisdom she had to offer. In addition, she trusted me with first edition copies of some of the texts we were reading. I was so honored to hold books that she treasured, but I was also terrified of losing them or wrecking them in some way. I kept envisioning her books slipping out of my hands into a muddy puddle in the parking lot, so instead of taking them home and fondling them with literary awe, I stored them in my locker. Kept them safe, for her. Further, Mrs. Volk entrusted me to share my insights with classmates, always assigning me “theme and relevance” with each book we read. My job was to dispel the “why are we reading this old stuff?” with connections to the present day, offering insights into why what we were reading mattered to us, here and now, as seventeen year olds about to dance out into the world. What a gift she entrusted to me. Once, she simply pulled me aside and told me to prepare to teach Thoreau’s essay on Civil Disobedience to the class. Although I was petrified beyond measure, she had groomed me to believe in the power of my thoughts, encouraged me to take risks when exploring literature, and showed me how to walk around inside the skin of the characters we were meeting. Asking me to teach Thoreau was one of the most cherished gifts she ever gave me. Years later, when I was substitute teaching at Okemos High School, the AP Literature teacher there showed me two sets of lesson plans: one was a ditto packet of questions on the Transcendentalists, the other was the actual text of Thoreau’s Walden. He said I could choose either way to teach. Thanks to Mrs. Volk, I chose the text and facilitated a lively and memorable discussion with the students. Ditto packet be damned. Thank you, Mrs. Volk.

And then there was Mr. Greer, the choir teacher. I was a band kid, and few ever bridged the deep divide between band and choir. These were separate countries, with rigid boundary lines. But I loved to sing, and I wanted so much to be a part of the Music Makers Ensemble – “We are the music makers, we

are the dreamers of dreams” called to me. Mr. Greer embraced this band kid, offering me a place to experiment with voice. He sent a handful of us off to Fred Waring Music Camp every summer – a faraway place in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania, where we would learn to sing and dance at the same time. We sang about twelve hours a day, learning unfamiliar tunes and choreography. Fred Waring thrived on the “oldies,” so we became steeped in the popular music of the 20’s, 30’s, and 40’s. Rich and layered harmonies, moving our teen bodies to waltzes and sambas. Years later, when my grandmother took up residence in an Alzheimer Ward, I wheeled her down to the sun room for a sing-a-long. The activity director was passing out lyric sheets, but my Nana, who could no longer remember my name or recognize me, said, “To hell with these sheets. I don’t need them.” We proceeded to, together, sing songs from her era, with neither of us needing the lyric sheets. We knew the words by heart, from our hearts. Sheet music be damned. Thank you Mr. Greer and Mr. Waring.

In truth, I have spent much of my adult life channeling Mrs. Volk. Although I began as a music major at Adrian College, where they had a conservatory of music and I would be able to study with a flautist who had studied with Jean Pierre Rampal, I soon learned that my lack of piano background was severely impeding my ability to be a music major. I could write 32 bar pieces, following a particular chord progression, knowing exactly how to mathematically move the intervals, but I couldn’t play the piece I wrote. As time went on, I transferred to Michigan State University, signing off on an academic advisor because I wanted to have full autonomy to design my own course of study. To that end, I meandered up and down the stacks in the college bookstore, pulling books I wanted to read and then signing up for those courses. I didn’t concern myself with level numbers or prerequisites, and not a single professor kicked me out of their class for lack of prior knowledge. They simply told me what I needed to read to catch up, and I did. By the time I graduated from Michigan State (and took classes at Wayne State and Western Michigan as well... long story!), I had engaged in a genuine liberal arts curriculum. Because I decided to go into teaching, I was required to meet with an academic advisor. When he looked through

my transcript, he said, “What the hell is your major? You are just in school to have an intellectual good time.” My response: “Are you complimenting me or insulting me?” As it turns out, he told me that I was in college for precisely the reason higher ed was designed: to explore and discover. Along the way, I had given up all desire to sit in on impersonal lecture hall classes filled with hundreds of students. After having a Humanities prof who clicked on his mic at 8am and turned it off at 10am, then picked up mid-sentence next class, I swore off large lecture hall classes. Instead, I sought out small seminar classes, where we sat at discussion tables or grouped our chairs in circles. My education was compellingly intimate and personal, often seeking out coffee hours with profs to further delve into what we were studying. I once sat in a bar at Michigan State University, long after the rains came and the bar flooded. Propping our feet on the table, we continued our discussion of Existentialism long into the night, accompanied by several rounds of beer and wine. Good times.

As a student at Truman High, I had aspirations to attend college. I would be the first in my family to attend college. My parents were from a small coal-mining town in Pennsylvania, and my father lied about his age and moved to Detroit to avoid the fate of going down into the dark, damp mines that bred Black Lung Disease. He was a mechanic with an 8th grade education, and he had more than common sense smarts when it came to working on cars. When I was nearing the end of my undergrad years, I began student teaching at Huff Junior High in Lincoln Park. My father was relieved that I would finally be making some money. Unfortunately, I had to inform him that I needed sixteen credits of tuition to be paid in order to complete my student teaching. He railed at having to pay someone so that I could work, and he informed me that he could have gotten a good job for me on the line at General Motors making fifteen dollars an hour. Still, teaching called to me.

I ended up teaching English for the next 32 years – one year in Taft, California, a few years at parochial schools in mid-Michigan, and then mostly working at the junior high and high school in East Lansing, Michigan. Mr. Horst’s lessons on speaking truth to power permeated my career, as well as my

high school life. Working at Crown Furniture Store in Taylor as a bookkeeper, my boss set his coffee cup down in front of me. When I asked what he wanted, he instructed me to get him a cup of coffee. At age 14, my response was, "I don't remember reading about that in my job description." He proceeded to get his own cup of coffee and never bothered me again. As an employee and a member of the teacher's union, I became a union rep. This role required me to support staff members as well as speak truth to the powers that be. I spoke as a teacher representative at many Board Meetings over the years, once offering the Board members Payday candy bars to illustrate that our proposed less-than-cost-of-living raise was "peanuts." Speaking truth to power. With props.

As time went on in my teaching career, I had the good fortune to belong to a group called LATTICE, which advocates for integrated, international education. LATTICE encouraged folks to apply for Fulbrights, which were government grants allowing teachers to travel to and study under-studied countries. I was fortunate to study in both Nepal and Turkey on Fulbrights. In Nepal, I was assigned to The Blind School, which houses all the students who are blind or along various phases of blindness. My teaching partner and I had to develop innovative ways to teach. Classrooms were often overloaded with more than 60 students, all crammed around small tables. Chalk was a rare commodity. So, we learned and listened. We learned about Nepalese culture, including some standard phrases and expressions. Eventually, my teaching partner and I performed a Nepalese version of "Jack and the Beanstalk," improvising and trusting in our connections we had built with our students. We took risks. We were sensitive to their needs, their culture, and their system of education. We improvised. We made education intimate and personal and, well, fun. All lessons I learned from my teachers at Truman High School.

In Turkey, we studied the identity issues surrounding the Turkish people. None of us on the trip spoke much Turkish, but we listened and learned and increased our understanding of this beautiful country and its people day by day. Being that Turkey is 98% Muslim, the call to prayer issued from the

minarets five times a day. Generally, we would stop for a moment and then proceed with whatever studying we were doing. One day, however, I wanted to listen mindfully to the call to prayer. I had read translations of the Arabic, and I wanted to experience the entire prayer. Our group was on the top of a mountain, at the ancient ruins of the Hittite civilization (around 1600 BCE), when I separated myself from the group and simply closed my eyes and listened to the call to prayer. A beautiful, lyrical sound. When I opened my eyes, a mass of blue and silver appeared before me. It was tangible and I was able to hold it in my arms, almost like holding a child. I experienced the most peaceful, mystical moment of my life there on top of that mountain – I saw the “blue lights” many mystics long to see. In addition, I was simply unable to move from this place, as if my feet were cast in cement. After consulting with a Shaman, I discovered that I was unable to move because the ancestors at that burial place were calling out to me. Again, a lesson from my many mentors at Truman High: be open. To this day, I carry that moment with me – a testimony to taking risks and being open. As an added bonus, I met my soul mate in Istanbul, Turkey. He and I returned to the States, conducted an eight-year long distance relationship between Michigan and Kentucky, and now live together in Madisonville, KY. We celebrate our ten year anniversary this June.

Another part of my professional journey as an educator has been to teach three summers in Guizhou Province, China – a very remote part of China, in the southeast. There, I mostly taught teachers. My task was to introduce the teachers to best practice involved in active teaching/learning. The teachers there tend to have 90-100 students in their classes, with desks bolted to the floor. The standard model of education there focuses on teacher lectures for about three weeks, followed by standard exams on the material. There is little interaction between students and teacher, and classrooms are expected to be controlled and quiet. Our job was to introduce active teaching, which often required students physically moving about the room, interacting with one another – a noisy proposition. One of the characteristics of my education at Truman High was that teachers often encouraged interaction,

encouraged us to voice our point of view, were advocates for our insights being spoken. While teaching in China, my students wanted me to give them English names. After I did this, I asked them to give me a Chinese name. Earlier that morning, I had asked them to vote on what we would be exploring next. I discovered that they had no context for “voting.” One student raised her hand and said, “Don’t you realize that no one has every asked our opinion about anything, ever.” These teachers ranged in ages from 20-45. So, I taught them a rudimentary thumbs-up/thumbs-down voting method. We voted on what to do the next day. When I asked them for my Chinese name, they informed me that they would return to the dormitory tonight, brainstorm several Chinese names for me, and then we would “vote” on them tomorrow. After the vote, I became Bailing – a songbird that sings a beautiful tune. Again, another lesson I learned from my mentors at Truman High School: the concept that each voice matters, that each voice has value and worth. I ended each of my journeys to China with a poem for my students. In the poem, I devoted a stanza to each student, honoring who they are as individuals. This concept, too, was foreign to them. Upon reading the poem aloud, the student featured in each stanza stood. I learned that they had never been singled out as individuals. And we all cried together during this moment that honored each of them.

Most recently, I journeyed to Kara Tepe Refugee Camp, which is on Lesvos Island in Greece. This camp houses asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Kara Tepe houses the most vulnerable of populations: families with small children, the elderly, and folks with various physical challenges. I volunteered at Kara Tepe for a month, living under very difficult and challenging conditions. The camp was set up to resemble a village, hoping to create an atmosphere of community and togetherness. People at the camp, most of whom arrived in ramshackle boats via the treacherous stretch of water between Turkey and Greece, literally had only the clothes on their backs when they arrived. As part of my service with Movement on the Ground out of Amsterdam, we visited the shore where many asylum seekers landed. We learned how the Greek people from the village of Mytelini lined up their cars,

shining their headlights toward the waters, showing the refugees where to aim their boats for safe sanctuary. I can't begin to tell you how moved I was by their compassion and generosity – and for their open hearts toward people in desperate circumstances. While at Kara Tepe, I ended up working at the “store” – a sort of Goodwill place that offers clothes and shoes to families as they arrive and stay at Kara Tepe. This job was both agonizing and joyous. Agonizing because we often had inappropriate clothes for the climate/culture. Agonizing because we had over 250 people on a waiting list for shoes. Agonizing because the squat toilets were few and the days were hard on the feet because we were all navigating the stones in the olive grove. Joyous because I could sometimes find a hijab that appealed to a woman's sense of style. Joyous because I could welcome each family with a sense of belonging and dignity. Joyous because I was able to work with numerous translators to facilitate communication. Joyous because, on days when we didn't have enough to offer the refugees and they became frustrated with so little, Zhino, a Kurdish translator, offered me her “crying place” when sadness took over. Joyous because when a young girl stole money from me, she returned it eventually – a teachable moment about her ultimately doing the right thing, even in circumstances when you are deprived and living in a situation that is alien to your way of life. Joyous because former refugees at Kara Tepe often return to volunteer, offering dignity and humanity to others who are displaced from their beloved homes.

My life has been filled with memorable moments of grace and peace. I am especially grateful to my teachers at Truman High for giving me the gift of adventure, of longing, of yearning for something more. So many of the teachers celebrated my individuality, encouraging me to “go confidently in the direction of your dreams” (Thoreau). To go boldly. To risk. To dare. To dare to be vulnerable. To dare to show compassion in the face of adversity. Their gifts have followed me, been imbedded within me, all these years. I am eternally grateful for each of them, always.

Marianne Peel, 1977 Graduate of Truman High School