Reflections of an Alumnus Author: Reading Books to Read Ourselves

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S o there they are. Abandoned cardboard boxes, a
tool kit of former students, stacked beneath the
staircase in a summer house, unseen for years.

Inside are all class assignments, carbon
copies of articles, notes from events and lec-
tures and interviews that took place 30 plus years ago:
the first mulch spread across a life in writing.

"Poetic," says one comment on an essay.
"But again, that clarity problem. B.""3

Nearly all that mulch was the byproduct of
education in Jesuit institutions, Loyola School in
Manhattan, Fordham College in the Bronx, plus
my boyhood parish.

By the time I graduated college in 1979, I
had spent nearly two decades in and around
Jesuit places, and even though I had taken only
one class in writing — my official college major
was "general sciences" — I knew that I would try
to live as a writer. It never occurred to me that
I was unprepared.

In the first place, the teachers in those
schools, Jesuits and lay people, taught me
to write by teaching me to read. Certainly, the pri-
mal joys of reading are experienced much ear-
lier than high school. The child learns what the
human voice sounds like on a page and feels the
enchantments of narrative.

The best teachers pushed me, Tom Ambrose,
a Jesuit who taught English and theology in
my freshman year at Loyola, naturally used different
books for each class — Nature Son in the morning
session, Night in the afternoon — but the same
tools. Take notes as you read; track the argument,
the story and the characters; summarize the day's
reading in a few paragraphs.

In short, interrogate the page. Interrogate
yourself.

One afternoon, Father Ambrose came to
class, sojourned. Inmates at Attica State Prison
had been holding hostages, but that morning, the
governor was a state trooper, and 41 people had been killed.
In the newspapers, we would read that inmates had mutilated and killed the
hostages. Some months later, we learned that vir-
tually all those first reports were untrue.

Add to the list of Ambrose-lessons interrogate
your society.

Five years later, Ray Schrotth at Fordham
taught a breathtaking book — A Time to Die,
by Toni Wicker — about the events in Attica.
In classes led by Schrotth, a Jesuit, a journal-
ist and my mentor, I saw that facts could become
literary. And those years seemed to bring a new
turnfork every day.

A Loyola Jesuit, Vince Butler, screened
Eisenstein's Battleship Potemkin for the 16-year
old boys in his film class and showed us how
narrative could climb a ladder of images. Gery
Moynan, a layman, brought us to the Mercer
Street Arts Center to see One Flew Over the
Cuckoo's Nest, and tipped us off about the great
<cluncated> then writing in The New York Post,
Peter Hamill and Murray Kempton.

One of the most useful lessons came from a
layman, Don Tramontinzi, after he graded a
social studies term paper. He red-marked a few
pages, then ordered me to figure out what was
wrong with the rest. It is hard to quote anyone
with confidence 33 years later, but the gist of his
words — "This is garbage by anyone's standards,
especially yours" — were as much about expecta-
tions as they were a rebuke.

A classmate and I ran the student paper, typ-
ing stories onto mimeograph sheets then handing
them out, a few hours from thought to publica-
tion. A basketball game won. A dance scheduled.
A favorite teacher unexpectedly pushed out.

On a modified Ignatian retreat, Tom Blasen
told us about the "plus sign" — short-
hand for the precept that we ought to assume
the best of people when we are not sure.
The idea that you could be liberated by doubt, not
manacled with suspicion, was the most purely
exhilarating fragment of Catholic teaching to
penetrate my head.

These men and women taught us to give
books the same moral scrutiny — and to find in
them the same delight — that they urged for
our lives. They questioned received wisdom, urged us to be self-critical without being self-
destructive, and gave us freedom to make
mistakes.

They passed on a discipline of tempera-
ment that transcends craft or career. By reading
books, we read our minds.