18. GRIEF AND TEACHING

_The Unnatural Order of Things_

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

—William Wordsworth, Stanza X, “Ode to Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”

These lines from Wordsworth’s poem commemorated the lives of a young woman and man who were high school students at the school where I taught and sponsored the literary magazine. Both students were murdered in separate unrelated and violent incidences. Both shot and killed before they ever reached a graduation ceremony or high school class reunion, their last school pictures show them frozen in time and youth. In the spring issue of the magazine, students wrote poetry about each student who was gone too soon and too finally. Though I had many good experiences in my pre-service teacher preparation program, I do not remember one class or professor ever mentioning how a teacher is supposed to deal with the death of students. Dealing with the death of students in the prime of their lives and supporting students grieving over the loss of their peers brings the unnatural order of things into stark view. As a teacher, knowledge failed me; therefore, the discussion of death and grief was territory left off the map of the curriculum. My experiences in my first teaching position taught me about how teachers, students, and administrators could negotiate the difficult and emotional terrain that death brings to a secular and institutional public high school.

I recently visited the high school where I first taught English. No thoughts of death were on my mind as I drove into the town; instead, I was caught in the chain reaction of memory that familiar places sometimes fold time across. I noticed how the landscape has changed. Ten years ago, the only restaurants in Grover’s Corners were Hardee’s, Tastee Freez, and Ollie’s Family Style Eats. Hardee’s has been
converted into Popeye’s Chicken, and the Tastee Freez has been demolished, leaving a lot of prime real estate between the new Krystal and Brighton’s Funeral Home. Other signs of progress abound. The Bank of Grover’s Corners’s old branch by the railroad tracks now houses a coffee and Internet café; surely that means progress even more than the new Waffle House. The dilapidated Grover’s Corners Motel with its one-story, drive-up-to-your-motel-room-door layout that stretches a block now has some competition with the Days Inn’s two-story building and new pool. The Bank of Grover’s Corners now has three other banks competing for your home mortgage, college savings accounts, and checking accounts. Seven new subdivisions are currently being developed in the county. Progress is alive and well in Webb County, but its small town atmosphere is still intact.

As I neared the high school, I still remembered the first time that I saw the complex. I marveled at the six lighted tennis courts, two baseball and softball fields, track, football stadium, and cow-filled barn. Coming from a large metro-Atlanta school district with multiple high schools that shared facilities, I was astonished to see the sprawling high school and the recent addition of a three million dollar fine arts center.

My cavalcade of memory took a more somber turn as I parked in front of the school and noticed over a dozen trees of various heights planted there. Many of these trees aren’t big yet because they’ve only been planted too recently—not all at the same time but too close for comfort. In the last two decades, 17 students have died while attending the high school or in their first two years after graduation, and a tree has been planted in memory of each student. Two of these students were murdered, one by a former student who now sits on death row. Two students had degenerative illnesses that claimed their lives. Another student died of cancer. One student ended his life in a “game” of Russian roulette. All of the other students’ lives were ended abruptly in car accidents. The trees are testaments to those whom we lost with small plaques commemorating each short, mourned life. Just as I wasn’t prepared for the death of my students, I wasn’t prepared for the swell of emotion and loss that seeing these trees prompted in me. The unfairness and acute loss seemed unbearable as I thought about the growth and promise of each life that was cut short.

I remember how the institution of school tried to address these unfathomable losses in its usual manner—a committee was formed. Even though death and grief are bigger than committee work, the intention of the grief committee was a good one—to make sure that, in death, each student’s life is valued and treated with equal respect while helping faculty and students mourn. As members of the grief committee, we developed procedures that administrators and teachers would follow in the event of a student’s death. We replaced the form letter in each teacher’s box announcing the death with a phone tree that notified teachers before they arrived at school. Long rectangular pieces of bulletin board paper were taped to a wall on the English hall with a “Rest in Peace” notation and the student’s name to create a memorial wall for the student. We later moved these memorial walls to the lunchroom commons area because it gave more students time to write tributes to the deceased.