

## **MORE CERTAIN THAN HOPE, SWEETER THAN CHARITY**

*By William Hecht*

LAST NIGHT, in an irritated state, I managed to frighten an innocent and vulnerable young being. I confess that it wasn't the first time in my life I had acted as a bully, and hope to never repeat the practice--even though the circumstances in this case were different.

It happened in the course of a new part-time teaching job. I am in my first year of online instruction and covering a subject that dates back to my graduate studies, one quite apart from my career experience. When my friend suggested online teaching, I wanted to explore it: you can do it from anywhere as long as you have access to a computer with Internet. The better nature of my teacher's heart prevailed--helped along by the pining curiosity of the student within me. Teaching is sharing, but it is also *learning*. The stronger version of the old quip is that those who cannot teach, are conscripted to merely "do."

The young being I refer to is the new online class that began only three weeks ago. It is young and enthusiastic--and impressionable. And I managed to bully it.

While grading papers, it became obvious that two or three students had taken shortcuts: they were cheating. I am not going to report them for plagiarism, not on the first offense and especially not in a class on World Religions--how are they going to learn tolerance if I can't be something of an example? I still got mad, though, and made a "post" to the entire class using the Classroom Newsgroup.

<b>From:</b>	<b>Max Dresen</b>
<b>Newsgroup:</b>	<b>Classroom SS121 WorldReligions</b>
<b>Date:</b>	<b>March 05, 2006</b>
<b>Subject:</b>	<b>Pasting search results</b>

**Hi, Everyone;**

**This post does not necessarily apply to many or even any of you. However, I have seen several examples of material that is obviously taken from outside sources, then copied and pasted into your assignments without being properly cited. This is unacceptable; when you read the assigned material and compose your own response, you:**

- 1. Learn from the reading**
- 2. Practice critical thinking**
- 3. Practice academic writing.**

**See the rules for use of reference material on the main school website. Further instances of this may result in zero credit for the assignment, an academic violation report, or a failing grade.**

**Let me know if you have any questions. Otherwise, please respond to this thread that you have read and understood.**

**Max**

Having immediately received several responses from panicked students wondering whether they had been among the guilty, I realized that I had broken a rule of communication: I wrote a message while under the influence of indignation, not quite emotionally sober enough to disconceal my ire. I will have to try and make it up to them—to the class.

Teaching online takes getting used to. Students can't see the teacher's face or expression. They only get a sense of him or her by what they read. It helps to take extra measures to set the proper tone, to come across as fair yet somehow benevolent. I found just the tools; I use the exclamation point. It works! When you use it, they hear the cheer in your voice! Obviously it cannot be overplayed. The question mark can also soften critique: "The next time you compose a paper you might try using an outline?"

Though they have my phone number, no one has called. There's a necessary anonymity, a certain "distance" they prefer. They need not fear me--in fact by the time the ninth and final week comes around, I have the kind of fondness for them that develops between pen pals, reliable letter-writers, and those you develop a rapport

with on the phone but never meet: the ones who validate you in ways the world you rub elbows with seldom can.

We don't submit pictures as part of the class format, so like the characters of a novel my students *develop* into personas. They begin as a class roster, a list of twenty names from as many different towns in the Eastern US. A roster, at first, is quite impersonal--like pins on a company sales map. Yet before long the students' personas take shape in the only way characters can, by what they say and do. Their first assignment is to introduce themselves. They post a short bio in the Chat Room on the first days of the course:

**From:** Trevor Stanton  
**Newsgroup:** Classroom SS121 WorldReligions  
**Date:** Feb. 12, 2006  
**Subject:** Trevor's bio

**He was named Trevor George Stanton. He was born in Ashville North Carolina on March 21 1983 when he will be 23 next month. He grew up with he sister Amelia and his parents where Roger and Ann Marie Stanton. He was a funny little boy his dog was named Ramjet before he died. He now works for the Brakes R Us corporation in Henderson he is called the best junure mechanic in the Henderson shop. He is taking classes to get his degree so he can be a criminal studies major for law enforcement. . . .**

**From:** Eileen Norman  
**Newsgroup:** Classroom SS121 WorldReligions  
**Date:** Feb. 12, 2006  
**Subject:** Eileen's bio

**I am 28 and a mother of three beautiful children. I have a degree in civil engineering, but I decided to take work leave to spend more time with the kids. My husband is a Physicist. I took this class as part of my own journey and look forward to learning more about World Religions. I am taking Philosophy, too. I spent too much time on the other side of campus and fell the need for balance. I look forward to meeting all of you.**

Occasionally the students are older and already schooled on the larger campuses of town, work and family and by the superior curricula of experience and curiosity.

**From:** Grace Immelt  
**Newsgroup:** Classroom SS121 WorldReligions  
**Date:** Feb. 13, 2006  
**Subject:** Grace's Bio

**Hi, Everybody. I am Grace from Tampa, Florida. At 68, I have been the oldest member of all my classes so far. I have four grown children and seven grandchildren. If my loving husband of 46 years didn't need me around to change his oxygen, I would have gone to the Tampa Community College instead. This is the education I wanted to get before anything was "online" and some would say before electricity. If I can settle on something to call a degree, I might get my Bachelors in by next year. Otherwise, I will just go around wearing a grin cause I know so much more than I did last year. . . .**

They welcome and greet one another by posting responses to the original "thread," in part to meet requirements and in part to establish their "ether-ego." Within three days, they have made hundreds of posts and woven an intricate matrix of cross-correspondence. This is when the magic, the miracle begins. As each persona, each incarnation emerges and interconnects, I never cease to marvel at the suddenness with which "they" become "It." A newly formed entity-- no longer a class roster--and no mere microcosm of the Eastern US, but a Class, with a capital "C," alive and aware of itself.

And while each student of SS121 World Religions is a unique blend of belief and skepticism, together--merged--this new and curious entity is poised to behold the impeccable arras, the tapestries that are the Great Faiths still expanding on the loom of human history. Like a museum group, they might utter a collective sigh as the ages hold up for them the soothing hues and rich textures of Buddhism and Hinduism. They might be awed by the potency and narrative of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam--the Abrahamic Faiths. The Class may be enchanted by the mystery and rapture of

scriptures and prayers, poignant despite the limits of translation from strange and ancient tongues.

When they appear to me like that--as one--I have hope. Especially evenings while many of them are online. My first flawed metaphor for them was as a small flock of white sheep spread across a grassy hillside. But I hardly qualify as a shepherd and they are not to be herded--only heard. In my desert night, they are much easier to behold as constellations: every star in view, each beaming its message through the gloomy ether, across the void.

My title is facilitator. I guide them through the curriculum, grade their assignments, encourage them, and monitor the cyberspace classroom. I deserve little credit for being, mostly, a watcher and observer. If I set the proper example and tone, they take their cue. Beyond the tacit authority granted me by the school, I take form for them as they do for me—by what I write.

Every other week the Class is required to participate in discussions about the material for that week. It begins with a pre-selected question that the facilitator must provide in as a "prompt."

**From: Max Dresen**  
**Newsgroup: Classroom SS121 WorldReligions**  
**Date: March 20, 2006**  
**Subject: Week Four Discussion Topic (Post to Classroom)**

**Discuss the following question:**

***From native tribespeople to members of large and modern cultures, billions of humans practice some form of religion. What purpose does it serve for them? How do they choose their religion?***

The reading material provides much of the background. Their answers should indicate a degree of competency with regard to the reading.

**Trevor Stanton; The people of the native part of the world are very primitive. They will worship a wood statue one that they carved to look like one of the gods they use in**

**there believes. We use religion to answer the problems of who made us and when we die where do we go heaven or hell. I just went to my parents church.**

**Grace Immelt:** The native or “aboriginal” people explain their world by what they see around them. More “civilized” people use religion to connect to a higher power and explain their existence. Religion creates a worldview and validates being. It can also provide a common ethic or morality. It used to be that you followed your family’s beliefs. Now there seems to be more choice in that regard.

**Lillie Pearson:** Religion give people the reason they exist. God is comfort to those who seek Him. Religion teach them to pray and spread the word of God for joy and salvation.

**Judy Malenfant:** Religion evolved to answer the big questions. Where did we come from? Where will we go? For many people it provides comfort from the fear of dying. I think people choose the one that makes the most sense for them.

During the discussion week, the facilitator makes intermittent posts to stimulate discussion, keep the subject matter relevant, or act as an academic reminder: a positive, but subtle presence among them. As with the best waiters and public servants (and I suppose in the manner of some deities), facilitators should impose only when needed, yet their absence is cause for concern. So I insert a comment from time to time, often hoping to incite a new discussion.

**Max Dresen:** These are good posts, Everyone.

**Faith, then, is the belief in something that can't be formally established as true. In other words, Doubt has to be part of Faith, or it would not be Faith. It would be Knowledge, would it not?**

As tempting as it can be to offer a personal perspective in the cyber classroom, the Class needs to be left to dwell in its own shelter or wander its own collective

wilderness. Besides, I am personally more qualified to discuss Doubt than Faith. Yet if the temptation to discuss my Doubt were ever too great, who better to give them than Walter Miller from *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (and how more appropriately than in Latin: the strange and haunting tongue in which prayer was both spoken and sung in my first year as an altar boy)?

*"Repugnans tibi, ausus sum quaerere quidquid doctius mihi fide, certius spe, aut dulcius caritate visum esset. Quis itaque stultior me . . ."*

*"Resisting you, I have dared to seek whatever seemed to me to be more learned than Faith, more certain than Hope, sweeter than Charity. Who is therefore more foolish than I?"*

And in my mind I would hardly bother to stop there. I would share with them a passage from Thornton Wilder's "The Eighth Day," probably the closest thing to a bible that a novel can be.

*John Ashley was a man of faith. He did not know that he was a man of faith. He would be quick to deny that he was a man of religious faith, but religions are merely the garments of faith--and very ill cut they often are. . . Like most men of faith John Ashley was--so to speak--invisible. You brushed shoulders with a man of faith in the crowd yesterday; a woman of faith sold you a pair of gloves. Their principal characteristics do not tend to render them conspicuous. Faith founded schools; it is not dependent on them. A high authority has told us that we are more likely to find faith in an old woman on her knees scrubbing the floors of a public building than in a bishop on his throne. . .*

And yet the *intellectual* search for Truth— Faith and Doubt in a tango in which Doubt invariably leads, really can't compare to simple and beautiful steps and strides made to the rhythm of posts by the young Class. One discussion thread led to personal beliefs:

- Lillie Pearson**      **The only thing that keep me together sometime  
Is the word. When life bring on the trouble the word  
give me peace to get by. My pastor says the truth will  
set you free well the word is my truth**
- Tammy Isaacs**      **It is so much easier for me to see the world as beautiful  
and as part of a larger plan by a benevolent creator. I  
pray and it seems to help me and anyone I pray for. I  
am happier when I feel close to my God. I don't know  
how atheists can function and handle life's trials.**
- Grace Immelt**      **When I was young and curious, I asked my father if he  
believed in God so he explained to me that if God made  
the world and God is perfect, then there would have to  
be something perfect in the world as proof that God  
made it. He said that Love was perfect because it is  
indestructible and eternal and you can't find fault with  
it. He said that probably some Art and Music weren't  
far behind. Pretty heady stuff for a shoemaker.**
- Come to think of it he never answered my question. Or  
maybe he did.**
- Trevor Stanton**      **I think faith is used to keep them from there fear of  
dying or to go to hell or when preachers make other  
people give money for chairty or missons and just  
keep it. I still have some faith anyway for my little girl. I  
won't care if I die if shes all right.**
- Eileen Norman**      **I hope not to offend anyone while expressing my views.  
I am currently investigating various alternative belief  
systems. I have investigated Wicca, and I often visit a  
Buddhist compound nearby. I currently consider myself  
an atheist. Until I find the right answers, my view of  
reality is that we are nothing more than sophisticated  
energy centers occupying a very small space in The  
Great Big Freaking Empty.**
- Judy Malenfant**      **Faith makes everything make sense for me. If I try to  
figure out the universe and life and death I go crazy**



**because I never get an answer that makes sense. One book I read says we are like thoughts in the mind of God. Deepok Chopra says we are like holograms anyway. I think a lot of people are just like me and want answers that work for them. I believe in the teachings of Christianity because it is mostly about how you treat other people and that works for me.**

Perhaps it is only the late hour at which I do most of the work for the class, but their messages, conveyed by the digital networks--the stuff of space-- conjure images. The authors assume shapes: crouched at a desk or kitchen table, in a den or bedroom, perhaps wearing a robe or nightgown. I get glimpses of them: the care in their eyes, their faces haloed in the glow of their monitors. Each shines for the rest--unaware that the light of their ideas must often cross and re-cross great distances, to register upon the eyes and in the minds of a classmate signing-in at another time from another place.

Just prior to my first experience as facilitator of World Religions, I was concerned that the personal and sensitive subject matter would elicit conflict and require a Solomonic tact in the handling of it. I underestimated the class.

**From: Max Dresen**  
**Newsgroup: Classroom SS121 WorldReligions**  
**Date: March 25, 2006**  
**Subject: Week Six Discussion (Post to Classroom)**

**Discuss the following topic:**

**The Five Pillars of Islam for Muslims are indeed like pillars of a building in that they strongly support the core beliefs of Islam.**

**Tammy Isaacs      The Five Pillars are to remind them that their God is Allah and to pray five times every day and give alms to the poor which are part of their strong beliefs. I could never fast for a whole month! I suppose if I were born that way and got used to it I could but I would starve to**

**death after the first day. I suppose I could make a pilgrimage if I saved like we did to go to Sea World.**

**(Reply to Tammy)**

**Trevor Stanton I could give alms to poor people if I got a raise but right now they wuld have to be pretty poor or I would have to fast instead of an Islam.**

**(Reply to Tammy)**

**Grace Immelt I think they only fast during daylight hours, Tammy. They also make exceptions for pregnant women, etc. It would be hard, but not impossible.**

**Eileen Norman**

**The Five Pillars do support the faith and the teachings of the Qur'an. The bearing of witness, daily prayer, regular fasting and almsgiving are all key concepts for Muslims. These measures seem austere to us yet my grandmother used to go to church several times per week and they would read the bible on Sundays for hours. I am awed to think that within an area covered by several hundred miles walked Moses, Christ and Mohammad (pbuh) and that their messages have inspired and moved billions since then. After learning more about it, I think Islam is an unpretentious and elegant religion. What shocked me most is that they worship the God of Abraham. The same God as Jews and Christians!**

**(Reply to Eileen**

**Trevor Stanton**

**I don't think it would be elegant if you were in the world trade center when 911 happended.**

**(Reply to Trevor)**

**Eileen Norman**

**My family lost a friend in that attack, Trevor. I think I can make the distinction between religious or political fanatics and people who live a simple and peaceful life of faith. I also think we have been responsible for too much death and destruction over the years. I meditate and pray for peace everyday (yes, atheists can still pray).**

**(Reply to Trevor)**

**Lillie Pearson** I will never understand a suicide bomber to kill those people who never did harm to them.

**(Reply to Trevor)**

**Grace Immelt** My first reaction to that was, “whatever did we do to them to make them want to do that to us?” As time goes on I try to have Hope that we can coexist one day like we do now with Japan and Germany after WWII. I am OLD but was too young to remember THAT one.

**Max Dresen:** This was a good discussion everyone. Clearly, religion can serve peace or war. Many cultures or societies place their religious beliefs at the core of their identity: threaten their religious beliefs and their whole identity comes under attack.

As the class reaches the last week, before they turn in their final paper, the students are asked to write privately about their experience in the class.

**Grace Immelt** I was really impressed by the Buddhists and Hindus. The idea of karma makes sense and though I am not so sure about reincarnation, they seem to believe in many of the same ideas, they just express them in different ways. I am very much saddened when I realize how much alike these different beliefs really are and yet somehow cause so much hatred and suffering. I really enjoyed meeting so many wonderful new friends.

**Trevor Stanton** I learned a lot from this class. Just because I don't have the same beliefs as those people I know what there god is like now. I wont change my believes for them but we shouldnt kill them just if they don't change to our way I wnet to the amish county once and we should leave them alone.

**Eileen Norman**      **This class was a wonderful experience for me and really helped me broaden my search. I am very interested in metaphysics and want to learn more about some of the mysticism of the Kabala and the Eastern religions. They seem to have experienced realms beyond space and time through meditation. I like the Muslim idea that God is unknowable. I am sure we lack the ability to think in enough dimensions to conceptualize the being responsible for the Universe. I am still an atheist, though I would probably admit that I believe in Love.**

One by one they leave the Class. It diminishes in stages. I am certain they forgave me my early outburst. I hope they did. I learned so much from them; in particular I found the answer to a question that arose last night as I entered the final grades for this very Class. It's a worthy question--it would make a good discussion question for a class of facilitators of *World Religions*:

*What happens to an online Class once the course ends? Where does it go?*

Thanks to them, the Class, my response would look something like this:

**Max Dresen:**      **Classes don't die; the students and teacher simply log off and carry a new essence within themselves, having left a sample of their essence behind--an exchange of energy. Then the bundle of shared ideas, the spirit of query and wonder and reverence that gave the class its soul, is hurtled in all directions across the Great Big Freaking Empty. Timeless and eternal, it careens alongside Light and Hope and Faith and Love and other Perfect Things, to be witnessed like a constellation in a desert night, or felt as inspiration in an open and waiting heart like a thought in the mind of God.**