

From the Annals of Teaching

Lemmings

By Teri Kanefield

In the fourth week of my first term teaching the preparatory composition course at the University of California, Davis, I was leading a class discussion about an essay on the difficulty of speaking against popular opinion. Offhandedly I mentioned lemmings. When a student asked what lemmings were, I explained what I assumed everyone knew: Lemmings are rodents that blindly follow one another, and when one goes over a cliff, they march to death en masse. From the back row came a question, full of skepticism: "Where do lemmings live?"

I wondered if the student was trying to get me off track. I remembered that device well enough from my own undergraduate years: Some teachers could be lured off track, others could not. I didn't want to be a pushover teacher, but I was taken so by surprise that I said, "I don't know for sure. Norway, I think."

"What do they eat?" The student who asked the question was an animal-science major, so she could have been earnest.

"Here we are at the University of California, Davis, one of the best animal-science schools in the state. I don't know anything about the feeding habits of lemmings. That's a question for your zoology professors."

"I've never heard of lemmings," one student said flatly, as if they were therefore of no consequence.

I looked them over. "Nobody has heard of them?"

When one student raised his hand and said he had, I asked where he had heard about them.

"Last year, from my English teacher."

"Ha," I said. "Do you see how practical English is?" They all seemed to feel that their science courses were more important, so I took every opportunity to show them the importance of studying English.

My comment brought scorn from Rojelio. "Lemmings are practical?"

"What could be more practical? How will you avoid being like a lemming if you don't know what one is?"

He considered this for a moment, and then said, "But there are no lemmings in California."

Now, what on earth was he thinking? I said: "But there are people who act like lemmings." Convinced that they were playing with me, I changed the subject back to the essay at hand, thinking we were finished with lemmings. Then, after class, a serious student, Jerry, asked me to spell "lemmings" for him. "I want to go to the library and learn more about them," he explained.

I wrote the word down for him, thinking that this beat all. For weeks I had been trying to find a subject that would engage them, but nothing succeeded like lemmings.

The following day, I entered the classroom to find a dozen students gathered around Jerry. Something was going on, something was exciting them, and I assumed,

of course, that it didn't have anything to do with English composition.

"What you told us isn't true," Clare said to me. "Look here. The reference librarian showed us this book that says the stuff about lemmings committing group suicide is a myth." As proof, she held up a photocopy of the page.

They expected me to be disturbed by this revelation, or at least apologize for having taught them something that wasn't true. Such literal-mindedness. When a few other students entered, Clare told them, "It isn't true. All that stuff about lemmings is a myth."

They settled into their seats, waiting to see what I'd say about this. "I had no idea lemmings are elevated to the level of myth."

"But myths aren't true!" said Lewis.

"Myths are very true," I said, "even truer than facts." If they had looked at me skeptically the day before, today they looked as if I were crazy. I told them that the most difficult questions, those concerning the meaning of life and the human condition, cannot be answered with facts, that art and religion seek to answer these questions through metaphor. "That's why you're all so fascinated by lemmings. Myth holds that kind of power."

A few of them understood what I was talking about; a few were probably convinced that they'd never understand their English teachers. Some of them, I'm sure, were pleased to discover that I was easily gotten off track, and maybe they were right. Who is to say, anyway, the difference between a time-wasting digression and a meaningful discussion?

Lemmings were not forgotten. Several times during the remainder of the course, one student or another found occasion to mention them. Each time, the class responded with twitters and smiles. I was new enough at teaching to be uneasy with their reaction. But at least I could hope that I'd taught them something they'd remember. ■

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