

THE ART OF JESUIT TEACHING



SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

“On Learning Late Who Is A Good Teacher”

James R. Kelly

I was late in discovering that Ed Cuffe was my favorite teacher. For more than a decade he was my unfavorable teacher, someone a clumsy sociologist might call a “negative role-model.” In and out of class he was nervous and twitchy, he did not cover the “discipline” (literature), and he gave odd assignments. He dressed like an e. e. cummings poem.

Back then I said “awful” assignments. Each week he required an “observation” — like describing how to tie a shoe. (The advanced students described tying both shoes.) Most often we had to choose our own subject to observe, he figuring (I thought) that the best torture was self-torture. I truly did not want to observe, I wanted to be a sociologist (never once sensing any contradiction). Actually, what I wanted most of all was to be “smart.” More accurately, I wanted to be thought smart. Being thought smart, I thought, would ensure success, which I wanted above all (this was way before the Reagan years exploded this naiveté). Quoting Shakespeare, I reasoned, might help, but not describing how to tie my shoelace. Sometimes he read observations in class, but never mine. This filled me with an odd combination of relief and longing which I’ve yet to find described in tomes of psychoanalytic theory.

Cuffe quickly advanced from bad to worse. Writing observations was an advanced form of time-wasting, but Cuffe was able to find something even more useless. Poetry. Not real poetry (I was ready for that). Our poetry. The stuff you had to write yourself. My best effort concluded,

Into each life a little rain must fall.
But why must I live in a shower stall.



Ed Cuffe, S.J.

While Cuffe was good at making us waste our own time with observations and poetry, he was even better at wasting time in class. He demolished weeks of time all on his own. When the mood hit he would spend the entire class reading dusty words from Samuel Johnson’s dictionary. Worse, he made us look up dozens of words in the Oxford English Dictionary. I found Webster’s Collegiate superior in every way — lighter, shorter and without all that mucking around in history. But Cuffe sought the “perfect” word with all the anticipation of my colleagues searching for the perfect restaurant. While he would say it was “fun” looking for the perfect word, I could only glumly see the real world racing by, thronged with competitors busily preparing for the Graduate Records Exam and taking all the good seats in Ivy League Graduate Departments.

Actually Cuffe wasn’t even good at being all-bad. On rainy days he would read funny stories. I especially remember Thurber. During that semester I prayed for rain a lot. I’d have plenty of time for Thurber when I didn’t make graduate school.

Cuffe confounded me on many levels. Because he didn’t read my observations and poetry in class I thought I’d better do extra work to improve my grade. I asked him if I could do some extra reading. He said, “Sure. Go to the library.” Thanks, Ed, I thought. “What book should I get?” “Oh, I don’t know. Poke around and find something interesting.” Thanks a whole lot, Ed. “What

should I do then?" "Read it." Beautiful Ed. Just beautiful. "I mean," trying to cancel out my embarrassment with anger, "what will this add to my grade?" "Delight," he answered.

I couldn't believe it. It was hopeless, he was hopeless and I was hope-less. I could see why this skinny, twitchy scarecrow of a man was teaching in a Jesuit seminary. The real world would blow him away. Anyway, maybe it would rain tomorrow.

Years later I talked with Ed on more than a few occasions, although always by chance. I was trying at the time to sort out my own demons, deciding how much of the "real" world I would let count in my own life. I was mostly fumbling around trying to teach the students that God and the admissions office sent me and thinking about what a sociologist ought to be doing to help them. Cuffe always brought me back to center, and not merely because he was unfailingly gentle, warm, intelligent and droll. I'm not sure I'll be able to say why.

He taught me to rejoice in the gifts of others, to see God in them, and to hold myself responsible when I do not find gifts of spirit and intellect in my students.

First of all, he seemed to be brave in ways that I needed to be brave. I imagined my soul looked like his body — skinny and twitchy and in great need of calm and whimsy. I knew by then, of course, that my first view of learning and life was instrumentalist and careerist and in retrospect greatly appreciated Cuffe's unsentimental acceptance of my crassness. He took me and all the others as God's gift — to take delight in, to show the beauty of the true word to, to nudge to "observe."

When I was in graduate school I met him once and he read me a story that he had cut from the morning's *Times*. During a monsoon in the Philippines two American-trained sociologists rushed out to study the behavior of peasants when hit by a sudden disaster — such as when their homes are being blown away. When at last Cuffe could tell me a story without explaining why it was funny I knew I had grown. He made it easier to go back to school and "observe" my prestigious and "value-free" professors.

I never once heard Cuffe use the term "spirituality," although I'm sure that is what drew me to him and has kept him a presence in my life. (There are other Jesuits as well.) He was twitchy but calm. Deep but playful (are they synonyms, Ed?). You would never catch him in a "piety," for he was a Jesuit. But, oh my! was he Ignatian in all that he taught and said! He taught us to love truth and beauty and to suspect both when they are not conjoined. He taught me to rejoice in the gifts of others, to see God in them, and to hold myself responsible when I do not find gifts of spirit and intellect in my students.

I remember the simple truths because that's what I needed. I still do. Delight is the way to God. But first you have to learn how to observe.

I cannot tell you how natural and unobtrusive these lessons were. Perhaps I imagine it (memory is mostly imagination) but when Cuffe walked his priestly garments did not completely cover his dungarees and sneakers, his common attire.

I should end the way Cuffe did, without pretence. There are Cuffean temptations that need resisting. He rarely published (although his work at *America* magazine was much esteemed by his fellow editors). He resisted even the semblance of specialization that academic writing required. And Ed would have found it ludicrous that anyone would write of him as a model for anything, especially spirituality. But with Ed flaws seemed like creases where light could shine through. I think St. Paul says something like this somewhere.

All of the above sounds sappy even to me. Too simple to do justice to a great Jesuit and teacher. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant." That was Ed. I remember the simple truths because that's what I needed. I still do. Delight is the way to God. But first you have to learn how to observe. Thanks, Ed.

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