

Of Poetry, Professors, and Soldiers

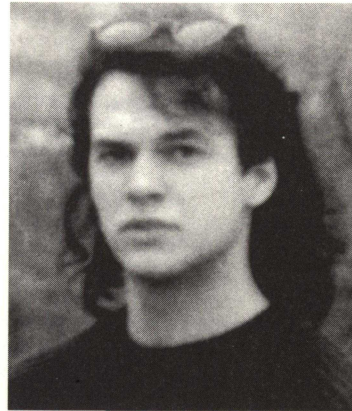
Last October H&S associate dean Ellen Bonaguro asked faculty members what they had heard from alumni about the value of their liberal arts degrees. Here's how Kevin Murphy, English, responded.

Dear Ellen,

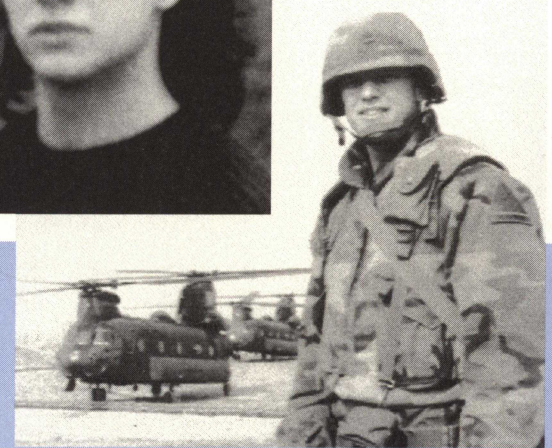
Apropos our conversation about students remembering teachers long after the fact, I received the following e-mail. With so many American soldiers poised to enter combat, I was overwhelmed by David Brown's generosity and trust in sending such a letter after 10 years.

As it happens, I was giving a talk at the Unitarian Fellowship the next morning on Ralph Waldo Emerson, using the same phrases from "Self-Reliance" that David cited. Can this really be a coincidence, or am I going to have to give up my hard-earned skepticism on such matters?

Kevin



David Brown,
student and soldier



Professor Murphy,

I write to thank you for your instruction and inspiration more than 10 years ago. You may not recall my presence in your classes between 1989 and 1991 (the poetry of Frost, Lowell, Bishop, and Heaney; the theme of women in literature after 1890). I was the tall, long-haired philosophy major who would frequent your office between classes. On one such occasion you provided me with a Signet Classic of selected writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson to assist me on concomitant themes between Emerson and Zora Neale Hurston.

Following graduation I traveled for a year and corresponded with [professor emeritus] John Ogden. As the grace period on my student loans rapidly dissipated, I knew that my days of frivolity were waning. Thus, my intended "voyage of . . . a zigzag line of a hundred tacks" acquired merely a few shifts in direction. After much thought over what to do to remove my debt while fostering growth to further cultivate myself as what Rimbaud called "a seer," I circumspectly joined the army as a behavioral science specialist. I have since completed a master's degree in psychology in 1995 and have begun the third year of a doctoral degree in clinical psychology. I cannot recall if I wrote to you while deployed throughout the Balkans and Europe from 1995 to 1999; however, I do remember reading a poem that you wrote to your late brother.

Poetry is the reason that I write to you today. Your tutelage has not only inspired me, it has also affected my soldiers. Throughout my nine-year career I've been entrusted with the lives of America's sons and daughters. Though I respect the views and choices made by Bertrand Russell and Robert Lowell with regards to military affairs and war, I willingly deployed to Bosnia in hopes of facilitating understanding and psychological healing. Whether deployed or back in garrison, I have insisted that my troops develop their minds as well as their bodies. Subsequently, in tents during a spring rain or winter's snow I have read aloud and listened to innumerable

poems from the tattered Norton anthologies that my wife ardently sends to the field. Though held together with tape and nylon cord, these anthologies have inspired others to think critically, often for the first time, as they transform from follower to leader. This cognitive shift is much more than a symbolic escape from mind-forg'd manacles, it is evolutionary. For this is where a soldier becomes a sergeant, a leader of troops responsible for the lives of others before concern of self. Though this may sound conformist, it is not. It is survival. I think of these lines from Emerson's "Self-Reliance":

"Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string."

"Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist."

"Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."

"Insist on yourself; never imitate."

I must admit, during their free time my platoons often look as tattered as the books that we read, but I credit a confluence of ideas and our robust individualism coupled with a sense of team and purpose for the results and accolades that follow when on duty in uniform. Though their interests appear esoteric among their current peers, they are aware that they have miles to go before they sleep once their enlistment ends. They have you in part to thank. Mahalo.

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires.

—Wallace Stevens

Your pupil,
David G. Brown '91