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Teaching Concerns

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The Zen Ten

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All happy seminar classes are, as Tolstoy no doubt would have said if he'd taught them, pretty much alike. (The unhappy ones are probably unhappy in their own peculiar ways.) In the happy seminars, you have a well-prepared, articulate instructor, engaged students and a shrewdly designed syllabus. Everyone, or just about everyone, prospers. But even in the most successful seminars, tedium can slide in. The format stays the same. The instructor enters, sits down, offers some introductory remarks, maybe a brief lecture, and then, perhaps pointing to a passage, opens up the discussion.

This can be a very fruitful approach and we've all seen good things come out of it. But slowly, the standard seminar form can get too predictable. The students become dependent on the teacher to get the discussion going. Each session, they need a jump-start and each session you need to hit them with higher voltage. Things become more directed and more determined by the teacher. The same people do most of the talking. Two-thirds of the way through the term, for reasons that aren't quite apparent, the class that was a joy to teach at the start is beginning to look more and more like a chore. Students who used to be there early, ready to go, are sauntering in late and mildly comatose.

One of the things that I've stumbled on to make a fundamentally good seminar better is a trick that I've come to think of as the Zen Ten (or Twenty, If You're Ready). This trick won't, I think, turn a bad class around; it's not major surgery. But it can produce some good results in a class that's already going reasonably well.

It works this way. Rather than starting off with a riff of my own, I direct the students to a passage and a question or two. Teaching Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," I might ask them to ponder what I take to be the most deeply meditative lines in the poem, the ones about rising above one's bodily being and becoming a living soul. I ask them to look at those lines with all the care they can muster, using the interpretive techniques that they've learned in this class and elsewhere. I invite them to sink the lines into the context of the poem and of Wordsworth's work overall. Then I ask them to consider some questions: "Is Wordsworth's poem escapist? Is he running away from something—from life? Or is he—maybe—getting himself ready for a more active, joyous, and generous immersion in experience?"

So far, we're following something like standard operating procedure. Now comes the difference. I tell the students that this is their discussion. I'll listen and take some notes, but for the next ten or twenty minutes, they're on their own. I bring a big clock with me to class (I'm in the reading glasses stage of life) and I give it a semi-theatrical stare. I assure them once again: I won't have anything to say; they'll have to do it on their own.

Silence. If I'm feeling anxious—and it's hard not to be with this exercise—I entertain a vision of this silence opening out into a great sterile expanse. When I was in Egypt not long ago, I had a good look at the Sahara Desert: the image reenters my mind. But the idea is to hang on, breath deeply (Zen) and wait. What you can't do is let your anxiety get the better of you and break the deal. You have to be ready to go the full ten or twenty.

Usually, the first thing that happens is that a couple of students raise their hands. They look plaintively in my direction. Nope. I won't recognize them; it's

their discussion. The longest I've ever gone in this way is five minutes—but there's five minutes and there's five minutes. The best thing to do, I've found, is to breathe at a steady rate and intone a self-created mantra.

Eventually, someone will speak. (Well, someone always has.) And—here's where the rewards start—it's often not one of the students that you expect. There's something about this shuffling of the pedagogical deck that brings other people, other voices, to the top. I'm not sure why, but in the three or four years I've been using this gambit, it always has. Every time that I've done this, the conversation has, in time, become rich, varied, lively, and unexpected. The last time I tried it out, a week or two ago, I learned, simply from being quiet and listening, what William Blake meant by'"moral individuality." It's something I'd been trying to figure out for, O, ten years or so. To get to this illuminating point, the students had to do a lot of work—which they did, and on their own.

The Zen Ten is a chance to concentrate on your students, figure out what's on their minds. There's a scene in the film *Pulp Fiction* where John Travolta asks Uma Thurman (Vincent—Our Man in Amsterdam—Vega asks Mrs. Marcellus Wallace) if she actually listens—or just waits for her turn to talk. It's hard, when you're conducting a seminar, not to be scrambling around in your mind figuring out what you're going to say next: this is a chance to take a breath and hear what's going on.

Do the conversations sometimes jump the rails? Sure they do. But even then, when in a discussion of Milton's interest in cosmic design, say, there's a detour into the matter of astrology, I learn a good deal. I find out something about what students care about and what they don't. In general, though, the students are less digressive than I am. They seem to want to prove themselves, to show that they can function as a group of intellectuals at work. And when they've done that once, it sometimes contributes to an esprit that lasts well on into the future. It takes a little nerve to try out the Zen Ten, but I think that students usually see it as evidence of trust and of a genuine desire to listen to them—and for that they can give back in rich ways.