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The Best You Can

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"THE BEST YOU CAN"
by S. Ray Granade
8/3/2016

Mary Washington taught History at what was then Howard College while I was a student. Possessed only of an MA, she epitomized the best of the "junior lecturer" tradition. She was widely read and traveled and displayed a love of learning on the one hand and an iron will that balanced that love on the other. Students found her immensely accessible while immensely knowledgeable—a powerful combination. Perhaps most significantly of all, she wedded her equanimity to the most pleasant of personalities. To contact her was to feel bathed in grace. To see her anywhere on campus was to see her smile.

Mrs. Washington taught a variety of classes at all levels, but the one I remember best was "The Ancient World." Our quality but densely-written textbook she supplemented with a paper assignment. We were to choose from a list of topics she proffered and produce a twenty-page paper well before semester's end. The dearth of resources, and our lack of other languages even had those resources existed on campus, obviated the usual requirement of primary material. We chose topics in ignorance and found what we could.

The semester went along reasonably well. Two exams, mid-term and final, and the paper would determine our grade. The mid-term was her usual mix of short answer, listing with explanation, and essay. But on the last day of classes, after our papers had been submitted (but not returned) and shortly before the final, Mrs. Washington dropped a bombshell. We would each, she promised, have an individual question on the final that would be unique to us. She would say no more, except to wish us good luck on the exam.

Her announcement left us stunned. We left quietly, only to begin almost immediately afterward talking about what might be ahead. The class was upper-level, so our twenty-year-old selves were sure that our vast educational experiences could "sus out" her plan. A few suggested a question from our paper, but no one believed that. It would be too much work, and besides it would be a "gimme" in a world designed (from our perspective) to see what we didn't know rather than what we did. Others were sure that she would construct a series of questions from our densely-written text, perhaps as obscure as illustrations. No one ever paid attention to illustrations: they merely took up space that would otherwise have been text and hence require reading. They were "free space," "free time" in assignment language. But a wicked, wicked teacher could easily take advantage of unprepared students and ask questions about illustrations! So

we studied and sweated and studied some more. Our unique questions were never far from our minds.

We took our seats for the final exam as students generally do, making a bee-line for the ones to which we were accustomed. My own accustomed seat, due to eyes that needed blackboard proximity, lay just audience-left-of-center on the front. Quietness descended as Mrs. Washington passed out our exams. After a quick glance at the individual question at the end, I started in, working from front to back just as always. There were the usual short answer factual questions. Check. Then came the listing with explanation. Check. Then came the essay. Check again.

Twins comprised two of our class number. They anchored the back row in every class we shared. The few questions they ever asked did not mark them as intellectually curious or possessed of a goodly store of intellectual furniture. As I worked my way through the essay, Jim came quietly forward to Mrs. Washington's center-front post. "Mrs. Washington," he softly began, "I don't understand this question." He had brought his paper with him, and it was turned to his individual question.

Mrs. Washington always smiled. The white teeth peeking out through the slightly-parted lips of the upturned mouth were as much a part of her physiognomy as her eyes, nose, or ears. She had smiled as Jim had spoken, and the smile did not fade with her response: "But Jim, it comes directly from the paper you submitted."

Jim did not return her smile. He had not smiled since entering the classroom, and his trip to the front had only further compressed his facial features. He fumbled a bit as he tried to start what he would say next. As loath as he was to form the words, he finally said "Well, I don't know what was in the paper I turned in."

Still slightly smiling, Mrs. Washington feigned puzzlement. She obviously meant to require a fuller statement from the student who seemed in the very act of shrinking, slightly but perceptibly, as he stood before her. "But Jim," she asked pleasantly, "how can you not know what was in the paper you turned in?"

Having avoided, as long as possible, what he had hoped to avoid forever, Jim was left with no choice. His voice became even quieter and his words had an indistinct, mumbled quality to them. "Well, Mrs. Washington," he began ingratiatingly, "I don't know what's in it because I didn't write it." She waited, with her slight smile, for more, in case any more should emerge. Nothing did. Jim became very still, having achieved his smallest state possible.

Still slightly smiling, Mrs. Washington gently and kindly responded: "I didn't think you did. Well, do the best you can, dearie." He shuffled back to his seat. She returned to her grading, still slightly smiling.