

HUNGERING FOR HARKNESS HALF-COCKED: GRATITUDE FOR WHAT GEORGE BENNETT NEVER SAID

By Christopher M. Brookfield '72 (Hon.)



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Who was George Bennett '23; P'60? If you weren't one of his students or didn't teach at Exeter around the time it was emerging from the era of the "nego,"* you might not know. For one thing, he was a man of few words; he observed and encouraged, and he listened intently. He edited two slim volumes of unusual and engaging short stories that most people have never heard of, and put together a collection of poems and commentaries. He was a master teacher—cryptic, kind and courageous.

One measure of his courage was in allowing me to teach English—I, a fledgling teacher of religion whose graduate degree was in philosophy and who had coincidentally concentrated on courses in modern European literature in college. The formidable faculty of the English Department, many of whom had doctorates and were authors of numerous books, did not want anyone who was "not qualified" teaching in the classroom. But George had a mind of his own, and he was department chairman. For reasons he never spoke about, he gave me a section of ninth-grade English as my first teaching assignment.

Fresh from graduate school and married barely a week, I went to his house to talk about the course and what books I was to teach. I was overly organized in those days, and carried a pad of paper around with me to be sure I put down on paper what I was supposed to do. I had even written out some pretty good questions to ask. George was on the porch—propped up on a chaise longue—thin, brown and agile, with smiling eyes. He was silent for a while, as I asked my organized questions to keep the silence at bay.

Where was the syllabus? He hadn't made it up yet, even though classes started the next day. Finally, he said to me, "I don't care what you teach, but don't teach the students anything you've learned."

"What do you mean?" I said, incredulous.

"Just don't ruin them. Don't use any 'good books' in class, nothing off a department reading list."

"What do you want me to use?" I fumbled.

"Anything you want to, as long as they never saw it before and you haven't either. Something fresh. It doesn't even have to be good literature."

After some silence, he said, "I've got some old English notes from 30 years ago; you might be interested in using them." Was he serious?

I was bewildered, hurt, insulted and scared. He was going to be of no help. I was getting panicky, and I could already feel the weight of all those eyes of the English Department faculty assessing my efforts in class each day. Best to leave. George had cancer, and I didn't know how to talk to him about that either. Neither did he.

*In his book, *Now and Then*, Reverend Frederick Buechner, '62, '67 (Hon.), former school minister, described "nego" as such: "The late fifties at Exeter were the period of the nego, and a nego, in Exeter parlance, was a student who was negative, against, anti, just about everything."

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Finis Origine Pendet

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But before I was all the way out the door, he said, “Why don’t you sit in on my class tomorrow? That’s the best way I can explain.”

The kids filed in, subdued, but with new-student energy spilling over into tapping fingers, instant smiles and wriggling in chairs. The bell rang. George returned the smiles, reading out the names of the 12 students. “I’m Mister Bennett,” he said, and then fell silent. So did the students and I. And the time dragged on; minutes seemed forever.

Finally, one faculty member’s son said something about the football team, and, relieved to be able to talk about something, others joined in. After awhile, almost abruptly, someone said, “What are we supposed to be doing here?” My question exactly.

“What do you want to do?” George asked, smiling slightly.

“Learn English, I guess,” one ventured.

“Learn how to write?” another offered.

George looked back at them intently, but said nothing.

“C’mon, sir, this is a waste of time,” said one serious student.

The bell rang.

“The assignment for tonight is to write a paragraph about something that happened in the Post Office today,” said George, over the scraping of chairs.

“What?” came the chorus. Then one brave soul sputtered, “What d’ya mean? *Nothing* happened in the Post Office. . . . You mean that place we get our mail, in Jeremiah Smith Hall? You must be joking!”

“See you tomorrow,” said George, reassuringly.

Unfortunately, I couldn’t make that morning’s class, but I went the day after when the students were reading aloud to each other their elaborate efforts at describing a paper clip (that was the assignment), cracking up at their futile attempts to describe effectively to someone else such a familiar object. At the end of class, the students were told they were to write a few paragraphs every day, and for the first three

months they could write only about their experiences on campus—no science fiction stories, no romantic tales, no “creative writing”—nothing but what they observed, in their own words.

Before becoming a teacher at Exeter, I had been educated in the best schools, taken courses in book editing and worked in pub-

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lishing in New York City. I attended night school at Hunter College and taught recruits in the Army Reserve. I had also taken the Army instructors course and had been assigned to teach in the Jump School at Fort Benning. What we taught the young men were facts vital to their survival. And by God, they learned them, exactly the way we taught them. So I assumed I wasn’t starting at square one in teaching.

But how could you teach this stuff?

The answer George was intent on helping me understand is that you can’t teach students *anything*—if, by that, you mean trying to teach them didactically how to appreciate good literature, internalize the rules of grammar and syntax—even to know what is essential in a study of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*. You may learn more about the teaching of English from your students than they will from you, unless you can enable them to converse

with each other in class about what they are trying to do and why—and whether or not they are accomplishing what they have set out to do.

What he never spoke about to me but illustrated by his example was the art of inventing crucial questions. The quality of class time depends upon the kinds of questions raised and responded to. Answers are important only after you have learned to live your way into the questions.

Of course George would never have offered such a clumsy explanation. I learned more from what he didn’t say to me than he could ever have told me. His silence was contagious. Eventually I learned how to sit in the silence for 50 minutes, if that’s what it took to let the students take the initiative to talk about what they knew (or didn’t), what they cared about, and what needed to be done with what they had read and written. George also had a keen sense of humor, and he knew that if you have to try to explain a joke, forget it—and how that related to the art of teaching.

Jack Heath ’52, ’56, ’62, ’70 (Hon.); P’67, P’70, P’72, P’75, who has written persuasively about how the Harkness system works (*Exeter Bulletin*, fall 1983), once remarked to me that what I didn’t

do for his son Jeff ’67 in the English class I first taught was just what Jeff needed at the time. Assuming Jack wasn’t pulling my leg, I never asked Jeff about what that might have meant for him. So I don’t know what it was I “didn’t do,” in hopes of doing it again.

When I applied to teach at Exeter, the Academy had the largest number of National Merit Scholarship students of any high school in the country. And when teachers from other schools wrote to the English Department asking how they taught grammar, George would reply in his cryptic fashion, “We don’t.” Then he would add, “All we do is ask them to write something three days a week and talk about it in class.”

George Bennett gave me the gift that made my struggles to become a good teacher for the next 45 years rewarding and revealing (sometimes crushingly so)—and I’m still at it, thank God, and thank George. ●