

LEST WE FORGET

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After 15 years of retirement, eight of them speaking Spanish on church assignments, my first day back teaching in the classroom last semester was pretty exciting. I had not planned to return. I was reluctant at first to accept the invitation, but Jack Harrell was persistent, and we worked out a deal. I wondered how different things might be now that we were a university, what might have changed where I spent 38 years of my career.

Nita and I got back from Chile in 2004. I started taking art classes as the oldest student enrolled at BYU–Idaho. When I took the elevator to my first class on the third floor of the rebuilt Spori, I remembered working as a student librarian my first year at Ricks College in 1947. I knew almost all the 300 students enrolled. With my new overshoes I tromped a shortcut trail through the snow from the front door of the Spori (not its name then) to the southeast corner of the campus on my way to my basement apartment at 125 East, Second South. Today the Spori front door doesn't open for through traffic. There is no way to get to the southeast corner of campus in a straight line.

There were two classroom buildings in 1947. The library occupied half of the top floor of one. The gym was on the top floor and a swimming pool in the basement of the other. Neither had formal names. There were a few auxiliary buildings, some war surplus temporary married student housing units (affectionately called The Lambing Sheds), and a temporary men's dorm which also housed a cafeteria. The women's dorm was located at 30 College Avenue. It had at one time been coed. There is a story how a few loose bricks enabled hardy souls to clandestinely climb from the men's to the women's floor, but that was before even my time.

No building of the 1947 campus remains. You need 15 instead of five minutes to walk between classes. After more than forty-five years as teacher and student, I feel more a stranger here than almost anywhere else.

One of the first things I noticed when I started taking classes again at BYU–Idaho is how much more sophisticated my fellow students are. Many are married. You don't ask a young man when he is going on a mission, but where he has already gone. Typical students carry a cell phone in one hand, a laptop in the other. They tote their scriptures to devotionals at sundry locations. Their apartments cost a couple thousand dollars a year. Mine in 1947 cost fifteen dollars a month. We held our devotionals in the Fourth Ward Chapel. Few general authorities ever came to speak at them.

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Two or three years before I retired, I started teaching composition in one of the computer labs assigned to the English Department. It was amazing what technology could do. I wished it had come along earlier in my career. Now, almost two decades later, my classroom has a super-sophisticated electronic teaching station. David Pfof, the computer man for the Smith Building, walked me through it. I had been thinking for a month about my first day back as a teacher and what I wanted to say about writing poetry. Here was a chance to do it right. A last hurrah. It was like a resurrection. My 15 years of pent-up teaching energy gushed out.

The excitement dulled a bit when the mouse of the teaching station wouldn't behave like mine does at home. I had a hard time hearing what students were trying to say. One of them kept giving me cues about the computer. Finally, he patiently came up and straightened both me and the computer out. I detected a bit of a gloat in his tone. The more he helped me, the more I felt like an idiot. Eight students dropped after the first lecture. I was glad he was one of them. My colleagues told me not to take it personally. There are always a lot of adds and drops the first week of class. The enrollment came back up despite my shaky start.

I was a little disappointed that the writing I was receiving was not as sophisticated as I had hoped it would be, given our university status. The apparent sophistication I had found with the upper-division students in some of my art classes wasn't manifesting itself so much in the class I was teaching. But my class is a lower-division beginning class in creative writing, about what I had taught before. After forty years of teaching and fifteen years of retirement, eighteen-year-olds still haven't learned a thing. The teaching challenge still is to find out where a student is and help her to take the next step forward.

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I scheduled individual conferences with each student—easier to do when you are teaching part-time and have only one class to worry about. I found these conferences built both mine and my students' confidence more than anything else. It is not often that a student bothers to have an individual conference on her own. Since I take a "no praise, no blame" stance in regard to student writing, I don't give written feedback on individual poems and stories students write. I receive all work anonymously through I-Learn, so that our discussion focuses on what is written, not on who writes what. Ultimately the student has to decide for herself what is good or bad about what she writes, basing that a lot on what we discuss about individual pieces in class.

The conferences are more about what the student wants to do as a writer than about how to edit and improve specific pieces of writing. I found one drawback. As I got to know my students better personally, I tended to want to grade them higher than I might have done if they were just names with little marks beside them on the roll.

Perhaps one thing about student writers that is different now than before is what I call the Harry Potter Syndrome. Some think that writing is a path to riches. Several were handing in “Part One of Chapter One” of a fantasy novel they were in the process of writing. It was hard for them to accept the notion that learning a process may be more important than producing a product in this stage of their writing career. They seem dubious that the Harry Potter phenomenon cannot be duplicated by some empirical formula for success.

The semester ended in pretty fair style. I wasn’t lynched on the spot by disgruntled students, and neither, as far as I know, was I burned in effigy. I was invited back to teach a second semester.

This semester I am more calm. I bought some hearing aids over the break to see if that would help, but I can’t tell for sure. The students speak louder this semester than last. The computer is no longer so intimidating. I don’t need as much help from the students to make it behave. I’m not trying to unload fifteen years of energy all at once. Only one student dropped after the first day. I made time for more individual conferences. I think I am teaching better, though it’s always hard to tell how much the students are learning until near the end of a semester.

I was asked what it was like to be teaching again. How have things changed? What things are the same? What I most find the same is the weather. Everything else feels a bit different.

Superficially, students seem more savvy. They talk about which tracks they are on, their target dates for graduation, about internships, clusters, foundation classes, texting: a whole new jargon. But basically they are pretty much the same. When we were a junior college, we were either freshmen or sophomores and expected to leave after two years. Spring quarter of my freshman year, Ricks became a four-year school. I went on my mission to Mexico in 1949, came back, met Nita, graduated in 1954 with a BA. I taught science at Madison High School one year before being hired as assistant librarian at Ricks in 1955. The next year we became a junior college again.

While I found no trouble getting my BA recognized when I went to graduate school, I see now that we weren’t ready for university status back then. We didn’t have the faculty for it. Some of our more academically qualified faculty left Ricks. But now we have the right credentials. I’m glad I was hired when I was. I probably wouldn’t be hired now.

I was introduced last fall as a man who started teaching here two years before my dean, John Ivers, was born. We didn’t even have a dean then. In 1955 there were about thirty full-time faculty. We knew each other. All of us were invited to teach at least one religion class. There was no separate Department of Religious Education. On Founders Day we picked up shovels and rakes and, shoulder to shoulder, faculty and students alike

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helped clean up the campus. I don't remember anyone trying to articulate the Spirit of Ricks. It was just there. Like the weather.

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I think President Eyring was the first to give the Spirit of Ricks a name. His administration was perhaps the most significant in moving us from being a good junior college to being who we are today. But as we become more and more compartmentalized, our circle of colleagues has grown smaller and smaller. When I asked an art teacher if she knows some of my friends in the English Department, she knew only one.

We keep being reminded that the Spirit of Ricks lives on even though the name of the institution has changed. I sometimes hear various attempts to define just exactly what that Spirit is.

Lest we forget, I suppose. ☺