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Mini Essay: Meredith Wales

In a world of coincidences and happenstance, I hit the jackpot: my first – and current – teaching position required that I frame our approved tenth grade English curriculum around “worldview”. When I left my first meeting with my principals after learning this, I was ecstatic; global literature, worldview development, and exploring the voices of historically-marginalized populations has been the cornerstone of my personal passion for literature and history. I busied myself with learning the resources available to me through Vancouver Public Schools. What I found, however, was that there was *plenty* of room for growth: the available book list for students in 10th grade English included a very limited range of author culture, race, gender, and perspective. Motivating myself to become very creative with supplemental materials has been a reality of my teaching life for nearly five years, yet after the political tone of the past school year, I felt like I was losing inspiration toward supporting a critical need.

Students at Skyview High School often arrive with limited worldview. While within miles of Portland, many of our students live in rural or suburban areas and are not exposed to the benefits *and* the issues that come with living in a diverse city. In fact, much of the entire Pacific Northwest lacks ethnic and cultural diversity in what the majority of locals considers its “native” residents; historically, some parts of the region were not welcoming to minority populations before the mid-20th century. In that respect, providing my students with a “real world,” worldview-focused curriculum is increasingly important. As an educator, I have a responsibility to help support and cultivate global citizens who are able to navigate our tumultuous political climate, and who value both diversity and equity. I imagined that the summer learning experience would help emphasize the importance of all voices on campus and within Vancouver, along with providing me with new material to bring back to my school’s collaborative English department. And, I was eager to get away from the demonizing messages portrayed in many media about border spaces. I wanted to gain a first-person glimpse at the daily reality of communities on both sides of the international border.

Selfishly, I also thought “Tales from the Chihuahuan Desert” could transcend my own professional needs and serve as a great distraction. I have been navigating the murky and precarious waters of grief since my mother, my closest confidante, was diagnosed with an aggressive case of early onset Alzheimer’s disease in the fall of 2013. For the past three years, I have spent a few weeks each July back at my family home where I acted as a caretaker for my mom. Summertime became synonymous with acts of love, duty, and transition – however terrible and challenging. As my mother is no longer cognizant, I decided that I needed to do something just for myself this year, something that might occupy my time, keep me busy, and keep my brain in full swing. In a way, I was searching for a way to forget.

My journey to El Paso began with some insecurities. I was eager to listen to, and learn from a diverse set of voices and identities. As someone newer to the profession, I am humbled by the experiences of others and always seek to learn. I have found that my sensitivity to the varied experiences of my students and the world has allowed students and staff to see me as a committed advocate and ally...but would this group feel the same? I hoped that my past as a global traveler, childhood in multicultural Los Angeles, and my consumption of diverse media and literature might allow me an “in” with the group. Yet those facts still did not negate reality: as a white, female-identifying, college-educated adult, I am often funneled into the sieve of educators who look like me, grew up like me, and share similar markers. Unlike many of the participants in the summer institute, I do not speak Spanish. I am not bi- or multicultural, and do not appear to have any affiliation with border communities. There were many perspectives to which I wasn’t sure I could relate, though I longed to absorb them all the same. Ultimately, I was worried that I would be perceived as an outsider, or that my time here would be “strictly business”.

Thankfully, what I discovered from the very first meeting of the Summer Scholars was that everyone was ravenous for learning experiences. After all, what type of person would willingly offer up a few weeks of precious summer vacation to participate in a fully-immersive, challenging, fast-paced institute, which for many was across the country? Being able to connect to, learn with, and most importantly, learn *from* other teaching professionals and thoughtful human beings has been the hallmark of my experiences during the

program. No two of us are alike; I heard stories from my colleagues of identity struggle, discrimination, self-exploration, frustrating workplaces, fresh perspectives, and innovative learning environments. I watched participants' viewpoints, including my own, be challenged, stretched, and validated. And, at times, I just sat around laughing with others, sharing stories and simply being present in the moment. It didn't matter that our worlds and worldviews were different. We created a new community of open-minded adults who approached new experiences by reasoning, and listening, and valuing others.

Unexpectedly, I discovered that in each day's exploration of human stories of identity, family, and trauma that I was not just learning, but also making emotional connections to our material and my colleagues' own stories. Reading a poem about Pat Mora's beloved aunt, listening to a fellow participant describe his relationship with his Mexican mother, and seeing examples of how family (blood, community, or otherwise) can unify often left me succumbing to a flood of tears. I finally allowed myself to acknowledge feelings of guilt for leaving my mother behind this summer, and for putting up a figurative wall of "business" in order to protect myself from her inevitable passing. I recognized my fractured relationship with my father and siblings and the barriers we face as we attempt to navigate our painful reality. And I noticed the superficial, cheery way I was presenting myself to my colleagues.

Instead of finding an escape in the program, I was confronted – albeit subtly – by the familial pain I was avoiding. It was from this insight that I recognized the universality of the concept of borders and the stories they construct. Putting up walls, physical or emotional, does not erase the truth. It does not heal, and it certainly does not connect. In learning about the Mexico-USA border, in particular, I was able to unearth my own sense of understanding for my family and our layered history, painful and beautiful. And I realized that my experience in El Paso wasn't just an adventure in curriculum development, but also a way to delve into the human experience. I am returning home to the Pacific Northwest with a better understanding about how human beings and their stories can do more than just resonate with others; they can help make connections and build a common understanding. While physical, cultural, emotional, or political constructs might appear to divide, these borders are porous and can be fluid in myriad ways.

Following nearly two bustling weeks in El Paso, I am ready to amend my anticipated outcome for the summer institute. Instead of just gathering curriculum and learning from other educators, I am also gaining techniques to help guide my students, as I did, toward seeing some part of themselves – no matter how slim – in the complex and diverse stories we read. It is my hope that through this deeper exploration of worldview, of personal histories, and of humanity at its core, that my entire school community can look at others with empathy. And, personally, I understand now that I too am shaped by the stories I live, and by sharing them I may begin a journey of healing and acceptance.