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Lex Runciman
Linfield College

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The first weeks of June

By Lex Runciman



Lex Runciman

Here it is the first full week in June.

Ten days ago, Commencement concluded under cloudy skies that mostly refrained from dropping their contents.

My English Department colleagues and I greeted our now graduated seniors – and their families – at a small reception following the ceremony.

New graduates are ill at ease, unaccustomed to mediating directly between their professors and their family members; two worlds collide, however benignly. Though we are tired from a year full with the usual teaching, advising, scholarly and creative efforts, committee service, recommendations, a national search, and multiple down-to-the-wire theses and last papers – we smile and congratulate and praise easily, sincerely. We repeat the old cliché, proved yet again, that the trouble with our best students is that they always graduate. The reception doesn't last long: everyone has somewhere else to go. We collect the plastic cups, gather the sparkling cider bottles now emptied, pick up stray napkins, and another school year is well and truly completed.

The first weeks of June are supposed to be pleasant, unforced days doing various long-postponed household chores and beginning to contemplate that stack of books accumulated over several months. It's supposed to be a time away from words (camping, gardening, traveling, river-rafting) or a time of

greedy eagerness to write whatever one wishes, to read whatever one wishes – without regard for whether or not it directly contributes to a particular course being taught or to be taught. It's a sorely needed time of recharging. All of June is supposed to be precisely this.

But last weekend's *Oregonian* reports the deaths of three soldiers, all from Oregon, in combat in Iraq.

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Their photographs show them, heads close-cropped, smiling or serious, wearing combat fatigues. When I first look at them – glancingly, the news still entirely new – a physical reaction results. All in an instant, my eyes close, shoulders and stomach drop, the head goes heavy: I know something before I can even formulate the words. The news account says this man I recognize is, was, 25. It does not give information on whether or where he went to college. The name under the photo is familiar, but then McCrae is a somewhat common name. What are the odds, I say to myself. How could it be someone I taught? Yet the face's familiarity becomes knowledge I cannot shake. And yes,

later news accounts identify Erik McCrae as a Linfield College graduate. I go to campus just to check my old grade books. It takes awhile to page back to the fall of 1997, but I find his name followed by a series of check marks and grades. As I look at his name in that list with the others, that course begins to come back to me in a fuller way. This is also the week that Ronald Reagan dies, and while I feel sympathy for the Reagan family, it's Erik McCrae's death that teaches me something about what I do.

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With an enrollment of roughly 1,700 students, Linfield College remains smaller than many urban high schools. Most of our classes are small: 25 maximum in the English Department. Linfield is also the sort of institution that remains almost invisible in professional discussions of English, composition, and higher education in general. We are not as well-funded or prominent as Princeton or Harvard, nor are we as visible as Ohio State or USC or any research university. Yet small liberal arts schools can be unusually familial in their character. If as a faculty we disagree over something or other, we argue not with anonymous colleagues from across campus, but rather with people whom we recognize. When someone does something especially well – teach a new course, compose a new work of music, lead an interesting class to Mexico or China – we hear about it firsthand. When our students land Fulbrights or other scholarships, we celebrate together about the success of individuals many of us know.

And smaller institutions make more possible what many teachers seek: an intellectual, nuanced connection with those in our classes. Teaching becomes the privilege of interchange conducted at a human level. Subject matter is only half the equation; the other half has to do with the opportunity to see how particular human minds work. Such teaching experience is certainly possible in any classroom (or, sometimes, online), but smaller institutions are devoted to it.

So, though I did not know much about his family or personal life, I remember knowing something of how Erik McCrae's mind worked. He was smart, open, articulate, well-organized intellectually; he could structure ideas and his responses to them. He could hold questions in mind without having to immediately answer them. He contributed to the educations of those in the room, including mine. His disposition was lively and awake; he listened with a sometimes bemused look on his face. He was curious, interested. I think I can even hear his voice.

His death reminds me how future-oriented teaching is. We presume a future in which those in our classes might act. In complicated ways, we seek to make that future brighter and better. This is not naïve innocence on our part, but it is a kind of bedrock hope. More directly now than ever before, I understand that war is a peculiarly contradictory challenge to that hope. Erik McCrae will not have his future, nor will his family, including his widowed wife. That is one staggering fact. As a teacher, I feel its rebuke. Against such loss, we are

always told, is war's justification that some must die in order to make possible a future we envision. Some fight for a future they will not share. These contradictions carry such power because we cannot resolve them. They help explain the fervor and tears of D-Day memorials 60 years after the events.

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I've done some of those long-postponed chores this week, but it's been harder to find the rhythm I associate with the beginning of summer and the recharging and rebalancing of energies after a long academic year. Instead, I have been thinking about war and its toll, about national policy and intelligence and how such things make realities beyond talk shows and magazine think-pieces. A friend's son has served in Iraq and has returned safely. My son-in-law, of whom I'm proud, has enlisted in the Air Force. I've voted in every election since the McGovern-Nixon contest. And I have spent a teaching career often devoted to questions of America—its history, its culture, its values, its literature. All of which I love, complicatedly, contradictorily, despite huge gaps between wish and fact.

Undergraduate teaching asks for a series of intellectual and psychic investments and beliefs. Often I've taken them for granted. I have simply assumed for all students in the room—in any course I've taught—some vaguely defined but lengthy future. Such assumptions are even reflected in Linfield College's mission statement: "Connecting learning, life, and

community." I've heard this statement quoted over and over in recent years, and I realize that I have heard it to mean "exemplary, aggressive, hungry, disciplined



First Lieutenant Erik S. McCrae '00

learning," and "long, various, complex, challenging life" and "community of all kinds—of place, of interest, of culture, heritage and common humanity."

This week, Erik McCrae has done his share of teaching. His death has redirected my attention and asked me to do what I've long encouraged others to do: I have been trying to re-understand learning, life, community, and my obligations and intentions towards them. I've been thinking and thinking again.

Lex Runciman is a professor of English at Linfield College.

First Lieutenant Erik S. McCrae '00, 25, of Portland died in Baghdad, Iraq, on June 4, 2004. Survivors include his wife, Heather (Smyth) McCrae '00.