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The first weeks of June

By Lex Runciman

Here it is the first full week in June. Ten days ago, Commencement concluded under cloudy skies that mostly restrained 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 belligerently. 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 familiar sentiments and intentions towards them. We argue not with anonymity much about his family or personal education in general. We are not as visible as Ohio State or USC or any research university. Yet small liberal arts schools can be unusually familiar 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.

Their photographs show them, heads close-cropped, smiling or serious, wearing combat fatigues. When I first look at them—glancing, 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 primarily on the excellence of English, compared to those who teach 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.

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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 intelli- gence 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, complicationly, con- tradictorily, despite huge gaps between wish and fact.

Undergraduate teaching asks for a series of intellectual and psy- chic 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 state- ment quoted over and over in recent years, and I realize that I have heard it to mean “exemplary, aggressive, hungry, disciplined learning,” and “long, various, com- plex, challenging life” and “commu- nity of all kinds—of place, of interest, of culture, heritage and common humanity.”

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Lex Runciman is a professor of English at Linfield College.

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