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## Teachers' Letters to the World

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This is my letter to the World  
That never wrote to Me-  
The simple News that Nature told-  
With tender Majesty

Emily Dickinson

## Teachers' Letters to the World

**Lu Ellen Huntley**

University of North Carolina at Wilmington

I began a project months ago to learn about you as a teacher. More truthfully, I think this started sometime around 1989 and has been a gradual awakening. When you died in 1990, just after Thanksgiving, I barely knew you, yet I felt connected. The day of your funeral when the minister addressed the congregation and asked for all former students of Miss Walsh to stand, the rustling of that many people rising from their seats—their collective presence, testament to a career of teaching—took away my breath. I wasn't sure what hit me. All I knew was that I was glad to be there.

Since that time, I've continued to teach and come to realize that teaching "legends" like yourself are a neglected phenomenon; regional status often unrecognized and your stories unwritten. I knew that you taught English and math for many years; and when Wilmington College was first established across the street from New Hanover High School in the Issac Bear Building in 1947, you were one of a few teachers at the high school who became college faculty. I was uncertain, however, about your association with "the college" which was to become the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. I thought you were one of the original female faculty members. Now I know your connection with UNC-W was as a part-time instructor of night classes, not a full-time position. Yours was an insignificant role; your presence there, mostly unacknowledged. The Dean of Students at the time says he often heard about your excellent teaching from students although he rarely, if ever, saw you. Former English Department faculty do not recall your attending meetings or social functions. Researching your influence at UNC-W has not led to discoveries I intended, rather the inquiry took on a life of its own. In the process, however, I have experienced much confusion. I did not anticipate that writing about you would be this frustrating—even inappropriate. But the more I learned, I realized you would not have ap-

proved of the idea in the first place. You would have said to me, “Get on with more important work—don’t fret with my life as a teacher.” You would not want to be the center of attention. I could not see this at first—which is why I am writing this letter—to let you know I got the message.

When I first met you, I was in a life transition. My husband and I had been married for one year; I was in the process of returning to graduate school, and we bought the house across the street from you in the Audubon neighborhood. In fact, your Dutch Colonial house—its period look—was a point I considered before we purchased our home. No wonder movie executives discovered where you lived to be a most suitable location for filming Carson McCullers’ *Member of the Wedding*—it is a place with an appearance of times past. I had no way of knowing a school teacher lived in the house, a “teaching legend.”

Since my mother is also highly regarded as a teacher, I know, in her case, it comes from relentless attention to honest work. With her, it’s always “do it right, or don’t do it at all.” This is not to mean she does not allow mistakes; it means, however, she will not tolerate indolence. She means business. Her standards—within reach, but high. What I’ve learned about you is similar. Former students say you were a “stickler,” “hard but good,” “immense dignity without being stuffy,” someone who exemplifies an ideal. About you one student said, “[S]he looked off into the distance and [we] looked off into the distance to see if [we] saw anything.”

I often hear that students who had never written a poem, wrote their first—and sometimes only—poem in your class. Kelly Jewell, a former student of yours in a night class at Wilmington College, says that when you read his poem “Going North,” you said, “That’s good. That’s almost too good.” It amazes me that over thirty years later he remembers this so vividly. His wife Isabel, who had you for homeroom and English, also remembers Kelly’s poem—it remains an event in their lives.

You might be amazed, as I was, to learn that Jewell’s most recent historic restoration project involved taking apart a house nail by nail, board

by board and moving it from Ivanhoe in Sampson County to his property on Chestnut Street across from where he and Isabel live. The country house, built in 1853, has two large chimneys constructed off the house to protect from fire, each made of handmade brick. This project begun in 1993 is now complete on the outside, and Jewell has added electrical wiring and plumbing. When he gave me an inside tour, the day I interviewed him about you, I couldn’t believe the seasoned wood and how good it smelled. This reminded me of Daddy and home. And when I mentioned home and the Anson County farm to Jewell and told him of the James C. Bennett House, a classic Greek Revival structure, designed by a New York architect in 1835, locally known as the Color Purple Farm, his eyes danced. The next thing I knew there was a role reversal, and he was interviewing me and wanting to know if it would be possible for he and Isabel to see this place.

As you know, Jewell was one of three people who helped establish the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society which began the revitalization of downtown Wilmington. His passion for old homes was what led him to the house on Princess Street where you lived during your childhood. Like other homes he has purchased and restored, he took apart this one too and reconstructed its Moravian architecture. The way the story goes, the house was built in 1880 and was the residence of the first physician of color in North Carolina. In 1890, the doctor died of consumption. Whether someone else lived in the house before your parents—Louise and Paris Horton Walsh—I’m still uncertain about. Believe me, I know you would want me to check any and all facts before writing; but what’s important in my mind is that after Jewell restored the property to establish the building for his real estate office, he invited you to come see it. When you did, Jewell says you noticed the mantle where you used to hang stockings at Christmas. I’m glad you were able to return to a place connected to your childhood and find it carefully restored. Knowing how you loved the holiday season, I imagine at 87-years-old you enjoyed a moment linking you to early Christmases.

Thanks to your friend Virginia Skillman I have

one of your originally designed Christmas cards that you sent to family and friends each year. I call her your “writing friend” because of the way the two of you corresponded. In letters to Skillman, she says you often enclosed poetry you had written and asked her for critique. Skillman says you “would make [her] feel [she] had something to give” as if you recognized abilities in her that she never considered herself. By enacting teaching beliefs Jan Schmidt describes as “believ[ing] in [others] more than they believe in themselves [and accepting others] and giv[ing] them more than they believe is possible” you engendered trust (70). Much younger than you, Skillman could have been one of your classroom students, and she says she felt like she was your student.

Skillman told me how you marveled over natural events—one in particular, your night-blooming cereus. The way she tells it, each time the cactus appeared poised to unfold its nocturnal bloom, you would notify family and close friends as if it were some new thing to witness. Each time it bloomed you celebrated the wonder.

Fortunately, for both you and Virginia Skillman, your friendship began during your retirement years when you had more time. But I’ll tell you this—she misses you. Modest, like you, Skillman says little about her own accomplishments, but this former state champion in tennis is still an active athlete, and her projects include letters, personal writing, and tributes to friends—she’s written several of you. She has saved all the letters you wrote to her and plans to arrange them in a scrapbook for her daughter. The letters and notes Virginia Skillman has sent to me have helped me know of the kind of correspondence the two of you shared. In one she enclosed a copy of an article from a 1942 Chattanooga daily newspaper about Miss Gussie, Skillman’s great-great aunt, genealogist for the library there. Skillman thought the article would help me understand you because she says that you and Miss Gussie were of the same sensibility—knowledgeable of history, open to others and their questions, loyal Southerner, and unwavering ideals of honor, faith, and hope.

Skillman led me to Kelly Jewell through her

acquaintance with Bill McIllwain, Jewell’s brother-in-law; and this family connection became a fortunate lead. McIllwain, like Jewell, remembers you as a teacher; he was one of your high school students in 1943 at New Hanover High School. The year before he was in your class he wrote an essay about an old woman he used to see get scrap ice from Rose’s Ice and Coal Company. His essay “Scrap Ice” told about her, and his teacher Ms. Smith thought it was pretty good. He says having Smith and then you the next year gave him two good teachers back to back. Out of high school McIllwain went to work for the local newspaper and later became editor of large city newspapers around the northeast. He found this work agreeable for a time; but when his life took some turns, he left this for smaller newspapers and began to work with writers on newspaper staffs, teaching them strategies for effective journalism.

As a teacher of writing, McIllwain found his niche. Most recently he has established “Top Writers of the Bottom,” an ad hoc downtown writers group that meets weekly in one of the toughest sections of the city. After the DEA seized the property at 11th and Orange, the rough crack section, the place was given to the city, and the city leased it to a community organization interested in improving the image of this rough part of town. When McIllwain approached the community association about his interest in teaching writing, the response was positive. Since that time a year ago, McIllwain has consistently met with any writers who attend each week, hanging with it to see where it might go. A sense of community has formed even though some people may attend once and never return, those who do come write in a variety of genres, and set plans or continuity are not the rule. McIllwain says “Writing’s just like tryin’ to quit drinkin’”; it takes discipline. He adds that some of the people who attend the class have experienced heartbreak about writing and continue with it after 15 or 20 years. He’s there because he’s interested in teaching writing with others who are interested in learning.

When Skillman told me that McIllwain was someone who might assist me with my research, I followed her lead. Just like she said, he looked

a lot like Willie Nelson and related well to my interest in teachers like yourself who encouraged students to write. The time I spent with him further confirmed that this research was directing me to individuals with stories of their own. In my effort to learn more about you, doors were opening to people and places in the community that I could not have anticipated. For someone who shuns attention, like yourself, it fits that your story involves the lives of many others, deflecting the spotlight so you are not the focal point. Your place in the community—my point of reference—led me on.

Learning about your teaching life reminds me of geometric progression—ever-increasing significance, yet your influence quiet, abiding in the lives of others. In geometric terms, you occupy negative space, the area that surrounds the subject matter. You are the unassuming presence in the background, seemingly uncolorful, nonetheless nuanced, a kinetic silence creating effect in a consistent, complex pattern. Your life could be compared to Op Art as it resembles “[p]eriodic structures of parallel, vertical or horizontal lines...produc[ing] secondary patterns and undulations of surface” (42). Yours is an energy like the art depicted in Bridget Riley’s *Current* in which everything is in motion:

The main movement is horizontal, continually changing direction and reaching its highest intensity around the centre of the canvas. It is counter-balanced by a vertical movement which dies away towards the upper and lower edges. At times, horizontal lines seem to detach themselves from the central activity and float upwards or downwards apparently in front of the canvas, gradually dying away as the more tranquil passages are reached. (Barrett 42)

To the Op Artist everyone is equal and can participate in the optical sensations. Similarly, your classroom was a place where every student was treated the same; support from you was unconditional. Shabby work or lack of discipline were never problems in a sphere where learners met “complexity of effect and simplicity of means” (Barrett 67). Like “the typical optical space, in which it is impossible to locate either the elements or their combined

effects” you set energy in motion from a grounded point, backed away—not too far—and gave students space to pick up on their own frequency. You controlled that fragile balance of power in the classroom by keeping your distance, “shifting [your] attention from the simple structure to the complex effects and back,” (Barrett 44) creating a constant rhythm, fertile room for the imagination.

Having taught geometry, as well as English, this connection to Optical Art adds dimension to my understanding of you. Moreover, as I have studied this art I see ways to describe the constructivist classroom that I have not previously considered. The intensity of the optical effects in Op Art is subdued by simple structures, and simple structures are heightened by luminous, energetic spaces. You have given me a way to describe classrooms where simple structures provide complex rhythms and richness. Like Op Art “relations are not strictly between things. They take place in an indefinite, optical space: they act like light” (Barrett 68). I am picking up on dynamics similar to the classroom.

I could not have come to this without your help. Nothing is finished. I am just beginning to understand how to know you. You are *sasanqua*—the short-lived camellia unlike those that bloom in winter; you are night-blooming cereus in its refusal to bloom when others are watching; you are, in Phillip Levine’s words, an ideal poem “one in which no words are noticed.” You are the kinetic silence in negative space—always moving, perpetual. Thank you for speaking to me about your teaching.

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