"Nor praise the vermilion in the rose," she read, and so reading she was ascending, she felt, on to the top, on to the summit. How satisfying! How restful! All the odds and ends of the day stuck to this magnet; her mind felt swept, clean. And then there it was, suddenly entire; she held it in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here—the sonnet.

—Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

To read literature, to commit the mind to imagining to and through how a work of literature imagines, means to know something of the unbound, something of the expansion that moves us beyond the pressing immediacy and presence of the world—to know the life of the mind. But I think, too, it means to know something of a great longing for the world and to know our place in it—as a means of having our selves. Teaching a seminar of graduating seniors what has become for me a life-defining work of literature, George Eliot’s Middlemarch, I asked why the novel suggests we wonder and search for that which is beyond ourselves, why the most expansive minds of the text—Lydgate, Will, and maybe most of all Dorothea—never feel self-satisfaction, always reach out for that which is beyond themselves. We came to see that the search for attachment—to a person, an object, a work of art, an idea—held open the possibility of feeling not alone, of feeling that one fits with or in relation to, of knowing the meaning of expansive connection between self and world.

Literature holds open that possibility of feeling the meanings of attachment and expansion because of how it calls upon us to imagine. In Alan Bennett’s The History Boys, a remarkable moment of quiet exchange happens between the literature teacher Hector (surely named for the Iliad’s...
Trojan warrior) and one of his students, Posner, the one who will himself become a teacher of literature. They meet in a place of shared meaning through the poem “Drummer Hodge” by Thomas Hardy:

_Hector:_ Uncoffined is a typical Hardy usage. It’s a compound adjective, formed by putting “un” in front of the noun or verb, of course. Unkissed, unrejoicing, unconfessed, unembraced—it’s a turn of phrase that brings with it a sense of not sharing, being out of it, whether because of diffidence or shyness, but holding back, not being in the swim of it. Can you see that?

_Posner:_ Yes, sir, I felt that a bit.

_Hector:_ The best moments in reading are when you come across something, a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things that you’d thought special, particular to you. And there it is set down by someone else, a person you’ve never met, maybe even someone long dead. And it’s as if a hand has come out and taken yours.

The life of the mind was my father’s life. It is to him that I write a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things—these words. His is the hand that I seek across death, across time. It is to him, my best reader, my best teacher, that I dedicate this book.
TO MY FATHER
Stanley J. Young
(1925–2007)