

Vivien Orbach-Smith
TEACHING PHILOSOPHY
Accompanying the Nomination for
New York University's 2018 "Outstanding Teaching Award"

Determined to shine on my first day as an NYU journalism adjunct, I over-prepared like crazy. Mostly I fretted that my lesson might not fill 3.75 hours, so I searched for activities to tack on if needed.

I came up with a quickie fieldtrip, inspired by a flyer soliciting articles for "Manhattan South," an erstwhile magazine of our department. The theme of the upcoming issue: "Downtown: Nerve Center of the Universe."

My father's former business was on Nassau Street and Fulton; I'd roved "downtown" through decades of change. I figured I'd shepherd my nascent reporters around the neighborhood--*who wouldn't love an outing on a gorgeous September afternoon?*--and steer them towards pitch-worthy stories.

Total win-win.

Except it never happened.

Class never happened.

My gorgeous first day was 9/11/01.

The Twin Towers, of course, would've figured prominently on my mini-tour. Somewhat irrationally, I found myself fixating on the what-ifs.

What if it had been a morning class, instead?

What if the attacks had occurred in the afternoon?

What if?

The prodigious responsibilities of teaching, mentoring and *in-loco-parentis*-ing had been engraved upon my heart long before that day. I'd once been a contrarian teen, a so-called underachiever who thrived only when a rare teacher sensed I loved learning and might have something to say. Years later, as a grad assistant, I was stirred by students' desire for in-depth feedback and individualized attention, a hunger that mirrored my own. As an [author/public speaker](#) and instructor in Holocaust education on the middle- and high-school levels, I trained myself to communicate (and to listen) unflinchingly on tough issues—genocide, bigotry, ethical decision-making, sexuality, diversity, social justice—eschewing personal agendas, championing nuance and daring to infuse humor.

Plus, I was a mother whose child had triumphed over dyslexia thanks to expert, compassionate pedagogy.

These experiences underwrote whatever rudimentary “teaching philosophy” I carried into my classroom one week after 9/11, with the air still sooty and acrid over Washington Square. It was Rosh Hashanah--a day I’d never “worked” before or will again--and I traveled on foot to campus after synagogue services uptown, believing that teaching, under the circumstances, was the highest, holiest act one could perform. Sure enough: 15 frightened, beseeching young faces brought to mind the epigram framed above my messy desk at home: “To the world you may be one person; to one person you may be the world.”

Through 30-plus semesters, I’ve remembered this.

The complex challenges and rewards of teaching journalism (of all disciplines) in New York City (of all places) at the dawn of the 21st Century, have made my job both a calling and a wild ride. As a daughter of Holocaust survivors, I never forget that a free and responsible press is the underpinning of democratic societies, and that we are all fellow travelers on the same vulnerable ship, in the same turbulent sea. I’m probably proudest of fostering an inclusive, collaborative classroom culture that helps highly diverse students develop an arsenal of important skills: thinking/speaking/writing/researching/interviewing/reporting/reviewing/embedding/investigating/analyzing/tweeting/posting/photographing/recording/filming/editing/editorializing--proficiently, accurately, respectfully across cultures and with the highest professional ethics, whether they’re covering war or the White House, biotech or Beyoncé.

Many of the technologies and media platforms that our journalism students must master didn’t even exist when I began teaching. Yet the heart of this field remains something immutable, no wifi or batteries required: good (even gorgeous) writing, telling universal, human stories and conveying truths that will serve the reader. To set that tone, I launch each semester with a quote from Margaret Mead (“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has”), and include a meditation on slain journalist [Daniel Pearl](#), for whom (wrote his widow, Mariane) writing was a way “to expose injustice, corruption and ignorance...question vested interests, fundamentalism and untruths.”

I’m heartened that today’s rampant cynicism about our industry has left most of my former students undaunted. They’re too dedicated and whip-smart to be deterred from becoming erudite chroniclers and thought-leaders. Some are already building high-profile careers that, objectively, leave my own in the dust. Whatever pangs I’ve occasionally had about this, they vanish when I get emails from leading young journos saying things like: “Let’s face it, VOS; if there’s ‘flava’ and heart in anything I write, it’s all owed to you.”

Flava and heart. I’d call that a pretty good epitaph.

In these beleaguered times, there’s nothing sweeter than devouring a piece of excellent reportage, only to glance back at the writer’s name and realize: “WOW! That’s one of MINE.”

I’ll forever be grateful for this inestimable privilege.

V.O.S.
Adjunct Associate Professor
NYU’s College of Arts and Sciences
Arthur L. Carter Institute of Journalism
15 March 2018