Heavens to Betsy

In the fall of 1992, I left what had become my home and took my first flight out of the warm, cozy nest where I had been lovingly fed and nurtured. I had transferred from Linn-Benton Community College, my haven, for two wonderful years, to Western Oregon University in Monmouth. It was a time of great excitement. At LBCC, I had uncovered my passion for literature, writing, and philosophy. My teachers had lit the flame, and now I was ready for blast off to my new destination to continue my training to someday become an English teacher.

While registering for my first term, I could hardly contain my excitement. Finally, I would be immersed in the studies I loved, majoring in English, minoring in writing. I enrolled in Women’s Poetry and Shakespeare taught by two male professors. Wearing my LBCC badge of honor, I proudly knocked on my Shakespeare professor’s office door to introduce myself.

“Hello, my name is Karyn Chambers. I just transferred from LBCC, and I’m in your Shakespeare class,” I announced nervously.

“Oh really? My wife works there in the registrar’s office,” he said as he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his chin with his hand as if deep in thought. I looked around at his huge bookshelves from floor to ceiling, covering every inch of wall space. Tattered, well-used copies of Homer, Dante, Milton, of course, and Shakespeare, all the greats that I would soon be studying stood like magnificent royalty.
“You are going to find that we have higher expectations for our students here than at a community college. We don’t do a lot of hand-holding around here.” As he said this, his brows squeezed tightly together as if he needed to show me the strictness with which I’d be evaluated. I noticed his roundness—his balding head and wide girth—while he sat there scrutinizing me. He had made it clear to me that although I had junior standing, in his book I was a freshman, and he intended to make me feel the increase in higher standards. After all, this was a four-year school, despite its small country setting.

After leaving his office, I walked through the gardenlike campus among the majestic Douglas firs and Cedars feeling small, my enthusiasm dimmed but not extinguished. I felt like a child having been scolded, wanting to hurry home, but I was determined to prove myself and succeed. I would study harder; I would show him what I was made of.

My meeting with my Women’s Poetry professor didn’t go much better. No disrespect intended, but he looked like a character out of Tim Burton’s Halloween movie—tall and very thin, almost like a walking skeleton, large round eyes too big for his tiny face. Everything about him seemed sharp. He even wore pointed cowboy boots. He too seemed to have a biased view of community college students.

When I entered each class excited to discuss poetry by contemporary women, he sat himself up on a table, crossed his legs, and talked about whatever fancied him at the moment, never even mentioning the assigned reading. It was torture to sit through his class. Then, as if to punish us for listening to his ramblings, he’s come in and announce we were imbeciles and give a pop test to prove it. What had I got myself into? I felt like
a stranger in a foreign land. I wanted to go back home to the nurturing environment at LBCC where I belonged, where I was valued and respected.

The more I talked to other students I found out that I had chosen the most bizarre out of all professors to take a class from. I went to the English department chair and told him about my experience. He apologized, and he said this professor had a file of complaints a mile high, but because of tenure, the college could not get rid of him. I had learned the hard way to investigate my professors before signing up for a course. I was depressed. My dreams had been dislodged temporarily. This was not what I had signed on for. I wanted to immerse myself in my passion—literature—and be part of a community, a place to share my enthusiasm and ignite the torch for higher education.

After this low point, an idea occurred to me. Maybe I could volunteer to be a writing assistant, working with a writing professor to develop my teaching skills and help others. So I again knocked on the department chair’s door to inquire who might need an assistant. He said, “Dr. Wallace is our writing professor. She’s in charge of our writing department. She’s very busy and hard to catch. You might talk to her.” I walked by her office to find out when her office hours were and planned to be there at the next possible opportunity.

The day arrived. Nervously, I walked down the narrow hallway and approached her office. There she was standing in her doorway, talking with a student. I waited patiently for my turn to speak with her. Finally, she was free, so I came forward and held out my hand to introduce myself. “What can I do for you?” she asked, smiling pleasantly, looking me in the eyes.
“I’m a new transfer student, and I am majoring in English. Do have a need for an assistant? I have tutoring experience, and I’ve worked as an instructional assistant in a writing lab. I have work study funding, or I’d be happy to volunteer my time if you could use my help.” She seemed speechless for a moment as if my offer were so unusual she didn’t know what to say.

“Let me give this some thought, and I’ll get back to you.” I could see the wheels turning. She had already begun thinking about projects she could use me on and how I could be of service. She recommended I visit the Watson House where the tutoring center was located and apply there.

As we parted, I knew that I wanted to take classes from her next term, that I would survive this term, and that she would play an important role in my training as a teacher. However, little did I know I had set in motion a student/teacher relationship that would carry me through my bachelor’s degree and into my graduate program.

That winter I enrolled in two of Dr. Wallace’s courses—Creative Writing and Literary Interpretation. The first day she walked in pushing a cart with huge stack of books on it. Parking the cart at the front of the room, she faced the class and announced, “I’m Dr. Betsy Wallace. This is Wr 341—Creative Writing.” I studied her every move and the way the light danced on her straight brown hair. Although she wore a wool skirt and jacket, she had Birkenstocks on her feet, which seem to give away her liberal philosophies. She passed out the syllabus and began explaining the course expectations. She held up our textbooks, Writing Without Teachers by Peter Elbow, a thin paperback book, and Falling Leaves, a book of short stories written by Native American women.
She also showed us a book of short stories by Reynolds Price, a well-known author that she had personally worked with that she recommended we take a look at.

“Now take out some paper,” she said after finishing her spiel on the syllabus. “You may write about whatever you wish. It could be anything. No one else will see this writing. It is private. The only stipulation is you must follow these rules. Capitalize every RSVP. Put an asterisk beside every preposition. Put an exclamation point next to every adverbial phase. And underline every verb.” We all started to write handicapped by these nonsensical rules. Finally, after about seven minutes, she told us to stop writing. “Ignore these rules and keep writing.” With relief, we continued to write. After her brilliant demonstration, she asked us to share how we felt trying to write with these imposed set of rules. Of course, we were frustrated and found it difficult to concentrate on our writing while keeping track of these ridiculous rules. She had successfully made her point, that worrying about grammar and punctuation while in the beginning stages of writing was constricting and counterproductive. What she wanted from us was to simply relax and just write. What a novel idea—to write without all the anxiety and worries about getting it right the first time! This was just what I needed after my unsettling, discouraging first term.

From this point forward, I regain my sense of confidence and excitement about my education. I eventually took eight different classes from Dr. Wallace, including Writing for Teachers. She taught me the kind of teacher I wanted to be—an igniter of the flame, someone to incite passion and enthusiasm for learning, to inspire the desire to research, find one’s own answers. During my last year, she became her assistant in organizing the Fifth Annual Composition and Rhetoric Conference held on our beautiful
small campus. There I learned the true meaning of collaborating with colleagues and was welcomed into her circle of women co-conspirators from all over the Willamette Valley. I had truly been inducted into the arena I longed to be part of. In the spring, I was voted Outstanding Writing Student and given an Academic Excellence award for a paper I had written in one of Dr. Wallace’s class. Even my Shakespeare professor had come to the reading and commended me for my essay. He said, “Karyn, your essay made me think about my own mother and really made me want to go home and write.” Finally, I had earned his respect for being a committed, hardworking student. What sweet vindication!

When I remember back to my experience at Western, I think of the most important lessons I learned there that still remains a fundamental part of my teaching today. Betsy Wallace was my greatest mentor; she took me under her wing and showed me how to engage students in the process of learning, inspiring them along the way. The old Buddhist adage “When the student is ready, the teacher appears” has definitely proved true time and time again. Thank heavens for Betsy!