

Uncle Willy and Will

Diane Rosen

Prologue

Imagine a city boy of nine in the summer of 1952, released from cement and soot for two delicious months in rural upstate New York. Peter and Robbie, more like his best friends than cousins, run with the strawberry-blond haired boy through field and woods, swim with him in the shimmering lake, stop for treats at the general store, and enjoy the blissful abandonment that comes only with idyllic summer days which, for a while, put reality on hold. When I ask about his favorite childhood times, the memories tumble like stones and string out of a young boy's pocket. But his prized remembrance, the one that he says "knocked him out," was seeing Shakespeare for the first time, in a barn, a summer stock production of *The Merchant of Venice*. A few lines spoken by Portia transformed the boy and, though he didn't know it then, would shape the man:

*The quality of mercy is not strained,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed,
It blesseth him that gives, and him that takes.*

(*Merchant of Venice*, IV.i.179)

Setting

John's choice is an ideal place to meet, a small cafe tucked behind Columbia's main campus buildings on Amsterdam between 121st and

122nd Streets. Angular white letters spell out 'MAX cafe' on a dark red awning. Beneath it, French doors stand open to sidewalk tables and chairs that suggest stopping for a while. The atmosphere inside is warm and casual; exposed brick walls, thrift shop drapes and furnishings imbued with anonymous histories. Velvet seats are either threadbare, or shiny from years of fibers pressed in one direction. Faded and frayed brocades invite lounging and lingering in conversation. First we sit at the open windows in oversized chairs, but once we sink into the airy cushions it's too low for comfort. We retreat further back, choose a dining height table and two sensible straight-backed chairs. The whole interior is reminiscent of a Tuscan farmhouse. Tables are simple, rough-hewn planks of aged wood, and the surface of ours is so uneven that I worry the tape recorder might fall over and stop working in the middle of the interview. Music from overhead speakers competes with traffic noise from the busy Harlem avenue outside, but once we get started they seem to cancel each other out. The stage is set, and finally, when I look up from turning on the tape, I notice that John Henry Browne has pale aqua eyes. As always, he is dressed with casual elegance in a neat polo shirt, pressed khaki slacks and top-siders. But perhaps it is the color of this particular polo shirt, pale aqua that *exactly* matches his eyes, which makes me notice their color.

Chronicles I

Disorder: No Safe Harbor

"I don't know how I feel about it," he says with playful ambivalence, "but many people use it." Discussing Freytag's Pyramid with his *Teaching Shakespeare* class, Professor Browne, veteran of thirty-two years in secondary English teaching and currently an Instructor in the Department of Arts and Humanities at Teacher's College, offers information but does not categorically endorse it. I'm sitting in on the class, and thoroughly enjoying the badinage. Analyze dramatic structure as rising action/falling action? Maybe. The implicit message is unmistakable: think for yourself. He does assert that "all of Shakespeare's plays follow a pattern from Disorder to Order," but then challenges his own statement with a paradoxical

question, dark around the edges: “Is what follows really Order or, setting up another cycle to begin, a prelude to Disorder?”

Disorder was the order of much of John’s childhood. The atmosphere at home, in an Irish Catholic enclave of the Bronx where he grew up, was riddled with the tension of having an alcoholic father. For a while, his father maintained a business and was doing well, but eventually “he drank it all away.” John’s mother, Mary McGrane Browne, was a woman of intellect, grace, and selfless forbearance. Though she and her sister grew up during the Depression, her father managed to send them both to Hunter College, and Mary graduated in 1935 with a teaching degree. When the Browne family bank account got down to seventy dollars, she went to work. Mary had to send her husband away twenty-six times to various de-tox and rehab facilities, and when he wasn’t there, home was wonderful. Still, she held onto him.

“She was a wonnnderful woman,” John recalls, drawing out the first syllable of ‘wonderful’ with a tender lilt that makes you privy to his feelings of intense love and admiration for her. “It’s funny, my mother died about thirteen years ago, but one of her good friends Mildred lived to 96, and I went to her wake. They all looked at me quizzically until I told them my name. ‘Oh, you’re *Mary’s* son!’ they said. So you know, it was all about Mary Browne. Someone would meet her and just never forget her. She had a strong aesthetic sense, and despite a really difficult life she was an open-minded human being who had tremendous enthusiasm for life. I think whatever is good about me came from my mother, although compared to her it seems to be a small percentage...” (His eyebrows scrunch into a V as he laughs.)

It seems to me that an only son, burdened so young with a crushing sense of responsibility, might slip into defiant self-indulgence. Instead, he “never had the chance to go through adolescent angst and rebellion because (he laughs quietly) you just had to be *good*. The load was so heavy you couldn’t add to it, so I was a very good kid, very studious. And it gave my mother something, something commendable; she was very proud of me. There was a wonnnderful (the lilt, again)

sense of unconditional love, and for my sister too. She just loved us and you felt that.” About his sister, who died last December at only 64, he says, “we both suffered, but I think she suffered more from our childhoods.” Also, and this was common in his parents’ generation, the boy was the star. “I always did very well in school and actually one of my motivations to do well was to give something back to my mother.” Being clear about his own motivations and priorities would help him navigate the harsh Catholic school environment in which he came of age.

St. Nicholas of Tolentine elementary and secondary school was a really tough place in the fifties and early sixties. Ironically, given their religious calling, many of the teachers were bullies. While they may not have lacked pedagogical skill, they lacked any real sense of the human. One vivid fifth grade memory is a typical vignette: all the desks in the classroom are bolted to the floor, telling you immediately how students are (not) valued in what goes on. Someone in John’s row has done something wrong. The nun in charge is yelling; no one is admitting guilt. To be sure she gets the perpetrator, she walks down the row and slaps every child in the face. That was her sense of justice. That was the way things were. Even his “favorite” high school teacher gets a mixed review. “Father Gallagher was a great math teacher, but an awful person, cold and authoritarian. I’ll never forget, at graduation he signed my yearbook with just his name, no personal message. Years later, I was a sophomore or junior at Manhattan College, he became ill and I sent him a card at the Mayo clinic. He actually wrote back, saying how proud of me he was. That acknowledgment would have been *so* important four years earlier when I really needed it.” John’s voice trails off, sounding an odd mix of resignation and incredulity.

This judgmental and stoical ethos offered nothing warm, nothing connecting. For a shy, insecure child, more ‘letter’ than ‘spirit’ was not the best formula. Even though he performed at a very high level, there was no one to say ‘good job,’ or “something,” he says almost plaintively, “something. And of course, given my home life, I didn’t have the resilience. I needed some kindness there.” He may not have

realized it as a kid, but I think he always had tremendous resilience.

John's alternate route to teaching is itself revealing. He was in the Doctorate program in English lit at NYU, going at night. During the day he worked at the city Welfare Department as it was then called. When his course in Victorian literature began to seem unbearably irrelevant compared to the desperate reality he was seeing every day, he knew he'd had enough. So he left NYU and, since he had to serve, he was going into the Air Force. "It's strange what happens in your life," he says. "At 6' 5" I weighed only 156 pounds and was painfully thin. (I'm not anymore, he volunteers, laughing.) So my papers came back because of my weight. The recruiting sergeant said, 'Have your doctor put down the right number, then say you lost weight.' Fortunately, the doctor wouldn't do it."

Around that time, his mother showed him an ad she had found for a six-week Intensive Teacher Training program, which he completed. Initially, it wasn't an epiphany. "I thought 'well, I'll try this for a couple of years,' so thirty-two years later... (he laughs again). And I think not finishing my Doctorate was also a good thing for me because if I had, and ended up teaching at a small liberal arts college, I don't think I'd have been much of a teacher. Having to deal with adolescents was a real avenue of self development that I wouldn't have had in the closed world of academia."

Junior High 22 in the South Bronx was John's first placement, a classroom in the basement with one small, high window. The school was huge, it was falling apart, the way they ranked the kids was horrifying, and his first year of teaching was crazy. "Mr. Browne," his assistant principal asked one day, "will you stand up?" He stood, and was immediately assigned most of the bottom level classes, presumably because his intimidating height would extract obedience. "In that first year," he closes his eyes, "I remember observing one teacher who was a tiny woman, and it was amazing to me that kids sat down in her class. I just knew it had a lot to do with her being full of praise for the kids, and responsive." In theory, he knew how meaningful this would have been for him as a child; once he glimpsed how it actually works in practice, finding something good to say about a kid became part of

his professional credo.

“I’ll never forget, this was also during my first year, I had two girls named Linda in two different classes. One was vibrant, smart, lively; the other Linda didn’t have much to say, she was really rather depressed. Well, on parent teacher night, I actually got the Lindas mixed up. So as I tell this mother how wonderful her daughter is, the poor woman is looking at me utterly perplexed. When I realized what had happened, I just shifted a bit. Then the next day, the quiet Linda came up to me and asked, ‘Mr. B., were you talking about me last night?’ ‘To be honest,’ I said, ‘I made a mistake, but then halfway through I realized it was you, so I did talk about you.’ And you know, I said some nice things about her and after that, it wasn’t a miracle, but she started speaking more in class, it made a difference.”

By late October his classes were out of control, the whole school was out of control. He literally taught in twenty different rooms. And it was a very bad year—Martin Luther King was assassinated, Bobby Kennedy was assassinated, it was just a very bad time. Anyway, they used to fire teachers by transferring them, and at the end of his first year John was being transferred. The staff, however, became incensed about this. They went to the principal, and he was reinstated. When he came back the next year, kids sat down, they opened their notebooks, they listened. “I have *no* idea (self-deprecating laughter peppers his sentences) what made the difference. Creating more structure helped, but that’s me, I need to be scripted, I need structure. I have to walk into a room and be really prepared, know where it’s going. So I was more organized, and I had been there, had gone through the fire. I was more of a known quantity perhaps, and maybe I had a little more confidence. And then by the third year they had me teaching advanced kids, so I was off and running.”

[*I think about permutations of the word Structure (verb): construct or arrange according to a plan. Structure (noun): the quality of being organized; an arrangement, pattern, system, framework. Stricture (noun): censure, reproach, sternly critical or censorious remark, as in ‘the constant strictures of the nuns.’ Structure resulting from stricture (emotional element): create order as a barrier against chaos?*]

When he started teaching, John didn't have vast reserves of confidence. In fact, the idea of getting up in front of a group was terrifying, and anxiety nearly prevented his move from teaching junior high to high school. September came around, but his appointment to Art & Design hadn't come through. Afraid to make the change, he used that delay as an excuse not to take the job. Eventually, the head of the English department called to say the appointment had come through, did he still want it? John told her he'd think about it, and called the next morning to accept. "That," he says, "was one of the most important 'yesses' of my life."

But it wasn't an easy transition. Even after being there a few years, the first time he taught AP English he felt nervous every day. All his time outside of class was spent reading critical analyses of *Madame Bovary*, trying to find "the" answer, and ask questions that would lead back to that answer. "Those students probably don't have the vaguest recollection of reading *Madame Bovary* because I was doing all the work (he laughs). And it was my truth and not their truth. If I had stayed in the junior high school, I wouldn't have challenged myself. I wouldn't be here today if I hadn't pushed beyond my own comfort zone. Confidence is one of the gifts that teaching gave me, and my transformation was amazing, really amazing. For me, it was mostly visceral learning. I learned it in the gut, without any real training. There was a knowledge base I didn't have, I had no idea what to do, and there was no one to turn to."

Learning viscerally as he did requires exceptional qualities, though John would deny that he embodies them. "No one is a natural teacher, no one is born to spend their life in a room with adolescents (we both laugh at this)." No argument there! But I disagree that there are no "natural" teachers. Like John, some people are naturally intuitive about the process. He can model lessons even when not directly teaching them. He spins webs of ideas that communicate even without the sequence of words. Often, he begins several fragmented thoughts at once, adds details, then switches to 'what I mean is.' Sometimes his passion and energy fuel multiple roads of conversation without finishing any of them, but you find

yourself unexpectedly completing the thought later on, perhaps in the hallway or when you're having dinner. His classes are animated and frequently punctuated by laughter. Enjoying the process, students unconsciously absorb that this is the way learning works best.

Humor is obviously something John values. Particularly a playful, self-effacing sense of humor that allows for vulnerabilities. To watch him at work is to know that who he is weaves tightly into what he does, and his humor, his generosity are all part of that whole. "Sometimes my humor gets a little dark, but it's always been there, at times as a protective device in my own life. I guess in a sense, to sustain yourself you need to laugh. Humor lets some light in, it breaks down some of the overwhelming seriousness. That's probably why people who've been oppressed often have a very good sense of humor, like African-Americans, the Jews and the Irish. As a teacher, you can either see certain things as humorous or as a personal attack (he laughs). But it's rarely mean-spirited, so I choose to laugh and just go with it rather than get defensive. Humor helps to humanize the situation."

At this point in his career, admired by colleagues and students and with a long list of *Outstanding Educator*, *Teacher of the Year* and other awards to his credit, John receives much well-deserved recognition. Characteristically, though, the only honor he mentions to me in our talks together is something that came from his students. "One of the proudest moments of my life was the year I left secondary teaching, when the kids asked me to do their commencement address." And he admits that he was nervous about that, too, thinking, 'what am I doing here?' When John enters a classroom these days, he exudes confidence in everything from his sonorous voice to his resolute stride and ready smile. But it's a developmental process with no prescriptions, no recipes, and it was hard won. "There are a lot of things, certainly initially, that are out of your control, so you have to be patient and kind to yourself as you go through this learning process," he urges, advocating emotional safety nets for teachers as well as for their students.

From my own experience in his classroom, I know that one of

John's great talents is putting his students at ease, making them feel safe enough to take risks. In contrast to the parochial world of his childhood, in which he must have felt invisible, John understands the importance of being a caring educator. His compassionate view of life defines happiness on a more human level where the individual is supported and valued. "I think it's extremely important for kids to know that you value them, like them. The hard part," he adds, "is that this can't be accomplished with words alone, it has to be shown by who you are. Part of that is being organized, and requiring things. It's not about saying 'come, let's all hug each other,' but knowing that when they enter the classroom someone is serious about what they're doing, someone cares about who they are."

Teaching English in particular, he feels, provides an opportunity to do that. "There's time to talk, to reflect. Living life is what literature is about; it's about the fact that we live, we die, and what happens in between is rather mysterious. And in very broad terms, it's about constantly exploring what it means to be human beings. It's great that students feel they learn and remember some content, but more importantly, you need to enable that to happen by creating a safe harbor, a refuge for them. We're in no position to take kids home and 'save' them. But I could offer a forty-five minute period where they felt like they mattered."

Chronicles II

Order: A Sense of the Human

The summer after his first year of teaching, John spent two months roaming through England, France, Italy, Germany, Holland, Spain, Morocco. His journey started in Paris, rather inauspiciously. He was meeting a woman there with whom he had a rocky relationship, and it turned out she already had a boyfriend in Paris. She and John parted ways. So there he was in Europe for two months, alone, really in despair. He headed for Italy, and "I'll never forget coming into Venice at night, it was pure magic." From that moment, the trip was splendid. Clearly his favorite country, Italy and the Italians were a revelation, especially their humor, warmth, sense of style, love of

family and great food. “Making really good food, sharing it with family and good friends” he elaborates, “is such a human endeavor, their humanity is shown in that....”

Suddenly pensive, cradling his chin in his right hand, he says “maybe one of the reasons I was able to do better my second year of teaching, is that the world had opened up to me. Having that summer in Europe, seeing different things, different lifestyles, meeting different people enabled me to come back and really teach. This is the first time I’ve thought about how crucial that summer was. I had gotten out of the neighborhood and had an apartment in the city, but traveling abroad for the first time was really pivotal for me.” And through his boundless passion for new experiences in art, music, drama and all things that are of value to him—John makes of the English classroom, where we deal with literature, with big ideas and with human choices, a microcosm of the larger world.

[I mull over the recurring significance of summer. Childhood summers in the country; a glorious summer in Europe; ‘Midsummer Night’s Dream’ where a summer adventure in the woods is an encounter with the lovers’ own unconscious. They leave the woods at sunrise, reawakened to a new consciousness. In the words of Demetrius, during the night some “power” helped him recover from “sickness” to “health,” confusion to order, self-absorption to a wider perspective.]

Even in a program that seeks to build a compassionate space, and among those who are in this supportive profession, John is considered to be an extraordinarily compassionate person. Part of that, I think, is his non-judgmental approach to what’s important and what’s not. “I once had a student who wanted to change his name to Science, wanted everybody to call him Science. So I said, ‘you want to be called Science, you’re Science!’ (he laughs, but fondly). Other teachers had real conflicts with him about it, they absolutely refused to call him Science This kid was bright, but he came from a very tough background. If somebody looked at him the wrong way on the bus, BAM. I would say, ‘you can’t do this, Science, what are you doing?’ I just figured he wasn’t going to make it. Then I ran into him again after he left Art & Design. He had met a girl,

he was going to college, getting things together. So we have to have a broader picture of how kids are going to develop, realize that they are adolescents and prioritize accordingly. You know, you teach for thirty-two years and over that time things happen in your own life too, and students need to recognize your humanity and you have to recognize theirs.

“Also, we’re always misjudging. You get a kid who’s not doing this, that, or the other thing, and then you find out his grandmother or his mother just died. For me, having an alcoholic father was a terrible secret, though, of course, everybody knew about it. And I’m *not* saying that when I was in high school, I would have wanted people to say, ‘John Browne’s father is a drunk, let’s not ask him to do much.’ But it would have been nice if once in a while a teacher had said, ‘Well, you had a rough time, so here, you can hand this in later’ or ‘It will be ok.’ So I always value that, the need for kindness, and the need to avoid looking at people as part of an institution rather than as individual human beings who have a life and needs outside of this. I fall into that sometimes, but you have to keep reminding yourself to see the humanity of the people around you as things are happening. I would frequently tell students at parent teacher conferences, ‘listen, we’re going to start fresh. Today is day one.’ And sometimes they would and sometimes they wouldn’t.”

With that reflection, he slips into mentor mode. “One of the best pieces of advice I can give to anyone in teaching, is when you have a lot going on and you’re getting really tense, just stop, look at the larger picture and, again, look at the priorities. Try not to take yourself or the situation so seriously. They have other teachers, other influences, other people in their lives. You want to be what you can be for them at that moment, within the boundaries and limits of your role. Above all, you want to be a transparent human being whose humanity they recognize and respect, but that’s something you earn by what you do.”

John’s humanity is so deep, his appreciation of diversity so wide, his commitment to education so strong, I doubt that he has ever felt discouraged about teaching. To my surprise, he has. It was around

1983, mostly for monetary reasons, partly because Art & Design was transitioning and wasn't the remarkable place it had been. Anyway, confronted with the decision to actually quit, he couldn't do it. Instead, in addition to 170 Art & Design students during the day, he started teaching another 70 students two nights a week at Laguardia Community College. "Some nights I would get there and sit in my office and just think, 'I can't do this,' but then I would start teaching and they were wonderful." He found a lot of success at Laguardia, and it flowed over into the high school teaching as well. Getting a lot of positive feelings again about teaching somehow rewired the whole experience. And, he readily admits, it was refreshing not having to deal with discipline issues, kids not paying attention, throwing things, or saying they had to go to the bathroom and not coming back (he laughs heartily while telling me this).

Dealing with adolescents there's so much going on emotionally that an empathetic teacher can easily be overwhelmed. "When you start a new secondary class, especially in New York City, kids are wary of you, they just don't trust you. And if they feel negatively toward you they shut down. But if you like kids and like being with them, if you create a place where they feel safe, eventually they understand you're on their side, you're there for them as a teacher and as a person who trusts in them, and they start to trust back." At Laguardia, his role became more teacher and colleague than teacher and surrogate parent. It's been said that parents are only as happy as their unhappiest child; on a broader scale, John believes the same is true with students. "But you have to know your own limitations. If you internalize their pain, you can't last," he pauses, "you can't last, it's just too much."

By the time he got to Laguardia, John had changed a lot of his teaching methods, but not his fundamentally humanist philosophy. At times he had students from as many as twenty-four different countries in his classroom, and he recalls how extremely hard working they all were. One stands out in his mind, an African-American man who drove a taxi during the day. "When he came to class, you could see how tired, utterly exhausted he always was. 'Mr Browne,'

he confided one evening, ‘to get into this graduate program, I really need an A.’ Truthfully, he deserved a B, but he was doing physics, all the heavy courses, his workload was unbelievable, and he was very bright. So we talked and I said, ‘you’ve got an A.’ In return, he promised he would always pray for me, and I thought that was a great deal! This must have been ten years ago, but I know he’s still praying for me. And I told him, ‘Some day I’m going to be in a hospital, and I’m going to look up and see you walking down the hall, and I’m going to say, ‘Oh, thank god you’re here!’” (He laughs so hard, deep squint lines form around his eyes.)

Expanding the focus, he muses on the concept of teaching as a social experiment, that we’re in a classroom not just to sit and listen to a teacher for hours but to open it up to a range of perspectives. If students do the work, do the reading, think about it, then they have a valid voice. [*I think: freedom within structure.*] With his usual modesty, John says, “At TC, I organize things, but probably most of what I do as a teacher is in selecting texts, presenting readings and facilitating. The students take off from there, they run the classes. It’s not me up there expounding on Blau or Rosenblatt, it’s the students talking, and I rely on that. My students are engaged and they are interesting, they have ideas I’ve never thought of. When I throw out a question, it really is genuine. I don’t know. I have my particular view, but I’m able to hear other views and then maybe alter mine.”

Not until graduate school did John feel that his voice was valued, and that was only in one class. In the traditional mold, everything was based on ‘what did the critics say,’ analyzing a piece of literature, decoding it to find *the* meaning. “Failing to acknowledge a student’s individual response is usually tied to the teacher looking for the answer he or she already has in mind. That’s how I was taught, but it didn’t make any sense. When there are different, thoughtful responses, there’s no single right answer.” That core belief, occasionally satirized but never disproved, is powerful. “I really feel strongly about it because in my student life, and for many years of my teaching life, that’s what I was expected to produce, that ‘one right answer.’” Rather than persist in using a flawed model, he

constantly made adjustments and changes.

Fortunately, the paradigm itself has shifted dramatically since John started in 1967. It might be said that before ‘student-centered’ teaching became a pedagogy and a buzz word, it was an ingrained conviction he always had, placing a high value on the unique voice of each student. Increasingly, he set in motion classroom opportunities that enable students to build a sense of community. “That’s so important,” he says emphatically, “it’s really the whole ball game, reinforcing the human connection that you make with them and that they make among themselves.” If the classroom has to be more of a workshop model, including performance, then that’s how it should be.

One reason Shakespeare always works, he explains, is that you can do an entire play right in the classroom and everyone is engaged. They go over it and over it while rehearsing, so they don’t mind the repetition. If they stumble, lose lines, laugh at inappropriate places, that’s fine because it’s all process. About ten years ago, John was one of fifteen recipients of a *Teaching Shakespeare Through Performance* grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. After five weeks in seminars here, the group went to Stratford, England where they saw eleven plays in two weeks. “There was a lot of discussion,” John remembers, “but what’s interesting is how most of that is very vague now; what’s real to me are the plays we saw. That’s why performance is so effective in the classroom, it reinforces the learning so it stays with you. If you’re in a group and you’re rehearsing and deciding how to present something, it’s a natural process that can be enjoyable, that physicalizing the language. It’s a way to create understanding and be true to the material, which is a script.”

John’s passion for teaching Shakespeare is entirely authentic; that is who he is, that capacity to “*physicalize* the language” is him. But at times, it blends with performance, too, when he performs what he wants to happen in the classroom although his personal energy may be at low ebb. He performs the energy for the community that he wants to create. “It’s funny, teaching for me is very therapeutic in many ways. For example, a couple of days ago, and as I said my sister

died a year ago, some things happened that brought it all back and I was really upset. The next day I went in to my office and began feeling better, then I taught the Shakespeare class that night and by the time I finished, I felt terrific. So the contact with people, doing something that you think is important, and... On a personal level, I've gained so much from being a teacher. If I had ended up going into the Air Force, I don't know where I would be. I think there's a certain basic structure of who I am that teaching fulfills. Teaching has been very, very good to me."

That feeling is truly reciprocal. Students are continually drawn to John's warmth and understanding. You even feel it in his workspace environment, as I do a few days after our meeting in the cafe. I stop by to spend a little more time with him while immersed in his TC habitat, a sunny, high-ceilinged office on the top floor. Neatly organized yet not formal, it's comfortable, welcoming and interesting. On the walls are displayed a kind of personal hieroglyphics of treasured items, some given to him and some originally his own. As we talk, my eyes drift toward images of Shakespeare (of course), Titania from *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a print of Venice by Monet, photos of Bobby and John Kennedy, Einstein, John Lennon looking right out at you and, hanging next to it in its own small frame, the solitary word "Imagine." Silently, I run through the lyrics to Lennon's famous song, realizing how much of John Browne they reflect: *Imagine there's no Heaven/ It's easy if you try/ No hell below us/ Above us only sky/ Imagine all the people/ Living for today/ Imagine there's no countries/ It isn't hard to do/ Nothing to kill or die for/ And no religion too/ Imagine all the people/ Living life in peace...*

"I can't tell you how many times a semester people come into John's office," says close friend and TC colleague, Professor Erick Gordon, "close the door, break down and cry. Certainly for younger teachers, he has this way of becoming a father figure." How does John keep this energy going? "I love walking into a school," he says, "walking down a corridor, being part of a community. I really love the social interaction, I love dealing with students because they're open, they're honest, they're real." And students love him. Tangible signs of

that esteem and love are everywhere in the profusion of Shakespeare artifacts that embellish his office. Shakespeare mugs, tea bags, mints, matchbooks, hankies, finger puppets and more are tokens of that collective affection. “We’re in a program that is probably 80-85% women,” Erick continued, “and most of the women are about the same age as John’s daughters. And these are *all* his daughters.”

Chronicles III

King Lear: Love is not always enough

Had I asked him thirty years ago, his favorite play by Shakespeare would have been *Hamlet*, but now it’s *King Lear*. “Of course, that goes with my personal connection, having daughters, but it’s also the poetry that Lear speaks, and the concerns that he has, getting older, leaving a particular role. I really like my job here, so looking down the road this is something I could do forever but I probably won’t. I’m going to be 63 in November, and, you know, when you give up something that’s been central to your life—as Lear volunteered to give up the kingship, and what happens there—(he breaks off his thought). I do have a life outside of teaching, fortunately, but a lot of my life is invested in teaching, a lot of who I *am* is as a teacher, so, the poetry, the poignancy of Lear make him my favorite. And the reality that comes from recognizing his own flawed humanity, how he tried to be king and not king at the same time, is very moving. Saying good-bye to things is difficult, and I’ve been fortunate because when I retired from teaching after thirty-two years, it was time to go. I went at a very good time.”

Mocking the deeper irony of Lear’s despair, the Fool quips, *Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise* (*King Lear*, I.v.48). John is older, though not yet old, but certainly he is wise. His humor may have a dark side, but it is also playful and frequently profound. “We’re all an accumulation of the experiences we’ve had. Given my family situation, although my mother was so terrific... (His speech pattern reflects another thought fragment.) We need to add that playful dimension because we could spend our lives just crying (laughter scatters the emotion). And given the Catholic rigor of

hellfire and brimstone, religion for me was all about fear. Not until I was in college, reading from Saint Paul about Christ offering love and reconciliation, was fear offset by another view. I can still remember thinking ‘where have I been? I’ve never heard this before!’

“Especially as a kid, you don’t need someone telling you you’re going to hell if you do this or that, when it’s impossible to avoid doing those things if you’re a human being. And trying to get to heaven, I guess, made me very scrupulous about things in my own life, but that’s an impossible expectation to live up to. Trying to be something other than who you are has a ludicrous side to it, which is why the word ‘hypocrisy’ ties into acting, from its Greek origin. When the curtain is pulled, you realize these are all just human institutions, worthy of laughter and sometimes derision. After college I became a ‘collapsed Catholic’ as someone once described it, I just sort of imploded. But I’ll always be Irish Catholic, there’s no getting away from that.”

We talk a bit about the way the world is going, bemoan the way kids are victimized by our over-technologized, junk media culture, by advertising, tv, movies and marketing which, collectively, are devastating. “I think in life (he laughs) I’m more pessimistic, but at least in the classroom I’m optimistic. That’s another reason why teaching is really good for me, being in a place where I can feel more optimistic. Generally, things are very good, my kids are wonderful, I’m in a great job. But sometimes I do tend to see things rather darkly. What’s important, I think, is to create a safe place and in that safe place to teach something that will be memorable. Classrooms are some of the last places where you can create a real sense of community. I read an article about a computer program that matches kids’ profiles with a list of colleges, which is great. But they still need a *human* guidance counselor, they need parents to take them around. You need that human quality.”

His own children are adults now. Allison has her Doctorate in psychology and works as a clinical psychologist. Gillian, his younger daughter, found her niche in science as a Physician Assistant. That both of John’s children are in “helping” professions is no surprise, but it strikes me that neither one went into teaching. In fact, it was

a given that they *didn't* want to teach. Of course, it was not exactly an incentive for them that their father always had to teach another job out of financial necessity, nor that he always put in the most he could even though he was over extended, since he felt so responsible for his students. He knows in retrospect that it wasn't good for his marriage. His wife, Lucille, also a retired teacher, understood the demands and the stress, but things didn't work out and they separated ten years ago. "Sometimes you can't leave emotional baggage at the door because while you're teaching, life is also happening, and while you're living life, teaching is going on. These are parallel worlds that impact on each other," John says. "But no matter what is happening in your life, you have a responsibility to filter out that angst as best you humanly can, and try not to bring it into the classroom."

Only obliquely does he refer to the need to filter out classroom pressures and not bring those into the home. "The focus has to be on the students, but on you as well, and what enables you to continue teaching and continue being the type of teacher that you want to be. It's essential to carve out time, to have your own life. One of the biggest problems with this profession is that if you don't focus on your own life, teaching can take over completely." For much of his own life, he feels it did.

In any trade-off, something is given up and something is gained. "The structure of teaching, for me, has always been very important. I've been so fortunate in my career, from the junior high, to Art & Design, to Laguardia, and now being here. I find that I really like belonging to something, I like belonging to TC. I've never had an office before, I have people being nice to me, people call me doctor when I'm not a doctor... I mean it's terrific! (He laughs mischievously.)

"As we were saying about Lear's decision, once I have to give that up, it will be difficult. Then, sometimes I think, 'well, no, I should move on.' And I don't know to what, but you know I could stop. I don't need to do this job financially, and like everything else, it has its frustrations. But I really love this job. And, all along the way I've taught students I'm really amazed by, that I greatly respect.

But one day it will have to come to an end. So, maybe that will be grandchildren. I'd love to have some. It would be sort of coming full circle, and that would be really cool. Then I think I would be able to move on. So we'll see. I get so much from teaching. It's, as I said, very therapeutic. Whatever I give out, I get back a hundred fold." Instinctively, he echoes Portia's words on mercy, which "blesseth him that gives, and him that takes."

Shakespeare's view of love resounds throughout his story as well. Regarding Lear and love, Harold Bloom writes in *Shakespeare, the Invention of the Human*:

Love is no healer in The Tragedy of King Lear, indeed, it starts all the trouble, and is a tragedy in itself... The gods afflict Lear with an excess of love. What the drama of King Lear truly outrages [is] our universal idealization of the value of familial love, that is to say, both love's personal and love's social value (p.484).

Lear loves his daughters, yet brings havoc on them all. Hamlet loved his father, but it wasn't enough to motivate appropriate redemptive action. Mary Browne loved her children unconditionally, but that love couldn't bring order to a chaotic home, or self-assurance to her shy young son. John loved his wife, but love is not always enough to hold a marriage together. And though he loves teaching passionately, his daughters chose a different path. Nevertheless, John seems to create balance for himself, and for those fortunate enough to be his students. Within a forgiving structure of his own devising, he is able to find personal freedom and success, and rather than be 'afflicted by love,' out of struggle, to feel blessed.

Epilogue

Uncle Willy and Will

"Going back to Shakespeare, the first play I ever saw was *The Merchant of Venice*. We were up in the country, in Smallwood, New York where we had a little bungalow (which I still have). We went every summer. It was a very small place we shared with my mother's sister and her husband, Uncle Willy, and their three kids. Down the road were my mother's brother and his five kids. It was a close

extended family. Even though we lived on top of one another, it was wonderful. Smallwood was especially exciting for us as kids because we were given a huge amount of freedom, and basically roamed the hills. Of course there was no tv, no telephone or car, but there were lots of other kids up there, and we were out of the city. Those were great times. For me, in particular, it was a saving grace because it meant two months away from my father's situation, and spending time with my mother and sister and cousins. It really saved my life.

“And Uncle Willy, who was like a father to me, had a profound influence on my life. He was strong yet he was the softest guy, a terrific person. He read a lot, he taught himself how to play the piano, he had a passionate aesthetic sense.” As a tribute to him, at his funeral in 1998 John read Horatio's beautiful words of farewell: *Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince. And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest* (*Hamlet*, V.ii.360). “He was an exceptional person, a gentle, wondrous man (the tender lilt returns to John's voice, the only time it does not refer to his mother). He had something comparable to my mother, that is every day he just sort of absorbed life. I don't do that (he laughs) but sometimes, a larger perspective does take hold of me. I'll never forget, I was living on Roosevelt Island years ago, and running down to get the tram to Manhattan one day, a rainy day, I noticed all these leaves on the ground. I wondered, ‘what's going on here?’ Then I realized, ‘Oh, autumn has started!’ (More laughter.)

“Anyway, I was about nine, and there was a summer stock production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Uncle Willy loved Shakespeare, so he took me and my cousins to see the play. Well, the other kids wanted to get out of there fast, but it just knocked me out! Of course, I missed all the anti-Semitism (he laughs), but I'll never forget Portia's speech about the quality of mercy, the whole idea of the importance of mercy. We *all* want mercy. Justice is cool, but we really want justice with mercy. And with adolescents, there has to be a high dosage of kindness and mercy. That's why, talking to students individually, you need to ask, ‘What's going on? Why are you doing this?’ And be willing to make adjustments, willing to be human.”