A letter from your Chem 1114 professor

17 August 2012

Fellow traveler:

This year I’ve again decided to take yet another big jump off a pedagogical cliff with a new and more informal approach to Chem 1114. While this will be the 12th time I’ve taught this course, getting it right is akin to the problem faced by the Titan Sisyphus. (Look him up if you don’t know who I’m referring to.)

I don’t mind telling you that I’m nervous about how the new approach is going to shake out. Freshman chemistry continues to present the most challenges to me as a teacher. This letter, however, is a tradition which I’ve found helps me get ready to teach again after a summer away from the classroom. We’ll be spending a long semester together on the chemistry bus so you should know something about the `driver’ beyond the usual stuff (married for 34 years; 2 daughters older than most of you; 2 cats and a house in the sticks between Catlin and Horseheads, NY). Here are 4 `juicy’ things to know about me.

**First,** I fell in love with Chemistry at age 13 when I read a book about chemical bonding (Yes, really! .... And I still have the book!) My training includes a B. Sc. with honors from the College of Chemistry at the University of California at Berkeley, and an M. Sc. and Ph.D. in Physical Chemistry from the University of Michigan. After graduate school I began my working life researching artificial photosynthesis at Purdue University. After 2 years at PU I signed on for 4X the money as a staff scientist at Corning Inc. located about 50 miles from here. For a dozen years I merrily studied glass, semiconductors and electrochemistry and invented things for the corporation. Six patents, ten papers and a zillion research reports later I left and started teaching at Alfred State in 1993. I hope never to work anywhere else. Pathetically, I’m in love with this place and its mission. I get to teach almost every kind of chemistry there is and have joyfully spent tax dollars as a Principal Investigator on several expensive National Science Foundation grants. I love coming to work every day (except when I-86 is iced over).

**Second,** I came to teaching late and by chance. I caught a terminal strain of the teaching virus while still at Corning Inc. and took a year of night classes in education at Elmira College. Not being bright, I then trashed my cushy job at Corning to work twice as hard for half the money as a college instructor. This is my 20th year teaching and I am still spending several hours *per* lecture getting ready. Despite this kind of effort and planning. what ends up working in the classroom still surprises me. The surprises are what excite me about teaching.

**Third,** I deeply appreciate getting a shot at teaching *you*. I don’t mean the vague, generic `you’ -but *you* of a specific socio-economic context. *You* are not likely to be rich. *You* are not likely to have chosen a small public college like Alfred State over a famous private university like Harvard. By and large, *you* are trying out college with tentative feet, unspoken fears and massive doubts. *You* may be struggling to pay for it all.

Many of the incoming freshmen at Harvard, frankly speaking, swagger about feeling they are owed honor and fealty because everyone tells them they are the `cream.’ Money is rarely a problem for their ilk. Students at Harvard are there as much to pump up resumes and egos as to learn. *You,* on the other hand, are part of a relatively recent social experiment to provide higher education not just to the rich, snotty and powerful (which is who the Harvards of the world mainly cater to-despite their hype), but to the hardworking spawn of plumbers, farmers and cooks in Chinese restaurants. FYI…I’m one of *you*, and for my money *you* are the heart and soul - the *real cream* - of what makes this country what it is.

**Fourth**, I’m flawed. As much as I love teaching, I can get angry, discouraged and impatient with you as students. There are days when I wonder if I made a horrible error in coming to this small upstate technical college, rather than having just stayed a researcher. The worst days are when I sense you are bored and unprepared, and when you exude an attitude of dismissal about the class, the subject and learning in general. It may be that I’m getting old, but it seems like that sort of ennui is becoming worse each year. I hope that you will not continue the distressing trend since I can never distance myself enough from the classroom to treat such a response as anything but my own utter failure as a teacher. Nothing feels worse. Nothing is as spiritually devastating.

When those days happen, I am comforted only in something I absorbed spontaneously and for free when I was a boy of 13 reading wide-eyed about chemical bonding for the first time- when I was neither research chemist, father, husband, taxpayer or born-again teacher:

“*The best thing for being sad,” replied Merlin to Arthur….”is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder in your veins…you may see the world around devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honor trampled in the sewers of baser minds. There is only one thing for it then-to learn. Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you.”*

T.H. White

from “**The Once and Future King”**

The above passage is the sacred kernel of being both student and teacher, and I submit, to being a full human being. Each time I read it, I come back to myself and why I’m here.

You come too.

Sincerely

Doc Fong