

Keeping the Faith: Rediscovering the Hope of Mike Rose

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This essay argues that Mike Rose’s work created a distinctive pathway for writing program administration. Rose understood education as a deeply human project—one steeped in questions of equity and educational principles. A return to Rose’s work simultaneously demonstrates the persistence of questions regarding what counts as education as well as how inclusion and exclusion are fostered by our attempts to define “higher” education.

Let me start by saying that the invitation to write this short piece reflecting on Mike Rose and his work came at exactly the right time. I’ll confess that these past two years have left me feeling fairly discouraged, and more than a little bit cynical, about the possibilities of education. When it comes to the promise of education—of, as Shane Wood reminds us in this collection, quoting Mike, that “grand human enterprise”—I needed to feel hopeful again. In my conversations with teachers of first-year writing in the very large writing program I direct, I’ve been hearing more and more from them about their struggles to keep the students who show up—or not—in their classes invested, present, and engaged. At the same time, much has been said and written recently about the crisis of faith the pandemic has occasioned. A recent piece in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (McMurtrie), takes up the question of why students seem so disengaged at present, positing, ultimately, that students may simply be unable to sustain their faith in the possible futures that they once believed education would secure. For me, especially in this moment, the act of reflecting on Mike’s life and contributions, and reading these authors writing about Mike’s impacts and his example, has been an entirely hopeful endeavor. Especially in my life as a WPA, in these times of trouble, uncertainty, and crises of faith, the experience of spending time with Mike and his work—and with others who are also spending time with his work—has gone a long way toward restoring my faith in the work of education, and in the power of the community of fellow educators who labor alongside me, even from a distance.

We don’t know for sure what Mike would have said about the pain and difficulty students and teachers are currently feeling, at *this* moment, two years and some months after COVID-19 arrived on the US scene in March 2020. I have a feeling, though, that he would have met the moment with his usual compassion, and would have offered a message of hope for his fellow human beings, and some ideas for a way forward. The thing about

Mike Rose is that he truly believed in the project of education, for all its flaws, limitations, and (even) its sins. His writing over the years is an expansive body of work that demonstrates—regardless of purpose, audience, and venue—that he never lost faith in the transformative potential of schooling, however much he saw it as an imperfect project. In fact, Mike devoted a life to inquiring into the function of education as a sorting mechanism, and he did so in the service of remediating its potential as an equalizing force. I, like many others, saw hope in—and felt *seen* in—*Lives on the Boundary*, which I had the opportunity to read in graduate school, when I was—like many others—questioning my place in the world of academics.

Then, as luck would have it, Mike was in the audience of my very first-ever CCCC panel presentation in 1992, and he approached me after the talk to voice his appreciation and encouragement for my ideas about language and class identity. That affirmation was more meaningful than I am sure he ever knew. It came at a time when I was deeply unconvinced that, as a first-generation student, I had anything of particular value to offer—other than, perhaps, my account of my own struggles to find a place in higher education. Mike helped me to see how that experience could be a powerful position from which to do research on literacy and learning, and how *that* could be a real contribution.

At this moment, twenty-five years into my career, and in my second go-round as a writing program administrator, I find myself in a good position to reflect on Mike's influence as a model of how to do the work those of us who lead general education writing programs must, necessarily, do. I have come to understand WPA work (especially now, in the third year of pandemic time) as operating almost exclusively in the domain of *wicked problems*. In the by-now-famous formulation of design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, a "wicked problem" names a situation in which there are only forms of compromise under difficult conditions, a kind of problem that "will generate waves of consequences over an extended—virtually an unbounded—period of time," and in which "the next day's consequences of the solution may yield utterly undesirable repercussions" (163). From this perspective, WPA work is a predicament that is, whatever else it may be, relational, a practice of negotiation for which the pedagogical work—and the work of translation between interested parties—is ongoing. The past three years, under (pandemic-related) conditions of institutional disruption and with the general erosion of trust that comes with isolation, negotiating the tricky relational territory of educational spaces has been especially difficult, and never more critical. Mike's distinctive ability to translate the work of teaching and learning writing to other audiences reminds us not only of how important it is for WPAs to make the work of literacy education

intelligible to various publics, but also how to be nimble and persistent pedagogues in relation to these publics. As a public intellectual, Mike made it his mission (and his practice) to talk to those outside out discipline—fellow educators, policymakers, other publics—who are also invested in education, and who have a stake in how it proceeds.

Mike's unfailingly human, and humane, way of seeing others is one of the things—in addition to his deeply embodied sense of the stakes and difficulties of education, and his exceptional talent as a storyteller—that enabled him to do this kind of translation work. You will have noticed that Mike's generous availability to others is a theme that surfaces across the essays in this issue. Many of the authors in this collection have stories of their encounters with Mike, and their discovery of his genuine humility. These stories of interactions with Mike—conversations in the passages and transitions and byways of educational spaces, and of everyday life—offer a testament to Mike's preferred means of engagement. Perhaps because of his own persistent sense of having landed in higher education as an outsider, Mike never underestimated the value of a hallway conversation, and never overestimated the value of the merely didactic.

Like many of those whose writings are collected here, I, too, had an experience of Mike as a fellow human. In fact, I had the astonishing good fortune to call him a friend. Our relationship developed through our mutual experience of being first-generation academics from the working class, educators whose interest in the work was related to our commitment to the value of access for students who, as Mike famously observed in "I Just Wanna Be Average," struggled to find a way in. I was enormously gratified, early in my career (and in the darkest hour of my impostor syndrome), that Mike paid attention to my writings on working-class experience and class culture, and—*even more remarkable!*—found them to be of value. We had long conversations about teaching, writing, and life in general; I learned, via one of these conversations, that a diner called Norm's Restaurant in Los Angeles, where I had worked for a time as a teenager, had been the place where his own mother, Rose (whose embodied expertise Mike chronicled in his book about the intelligence of forms of everyday labor, *The Mind At Work*) had worked for many years. It so often seemed as if we were fellow travelers, connected by the path we'd shared, and by our commitment to the same destination. In reading the pieces in this collection, I'm not at all surprised to find that I am far from alone in my experiences with, and observations of, Mike's interactions with others, and in the grace he always, without exception, extended to these others—colleagues, admirers, strangers.

In explaining to other admirers and students of Mike's work—others who had not had the good fortune to meet him—what Mike was like, I like to tell this story: At CCCCs in 2009, Mike and I had planned to meet up in the lobby of the conference hotel, and then head off to a local bar to grab a drink and catch up. We'd found each other in the lobby of the San Francisco Hilton—or rather, I found him, surrounded, as always, with fans who had spotted and encircled him. After Mike was finally able to disengage and take his leave, we began to make our way toward the exit. On (what became a very protracted) journey across the hotel lobby, it seemed that Mike could only make a few feet of progress in any direction before being stopped and greeted by yet another person who had found his work to be meaningful in some way. I recall that he engaged every single person who approached him. Every single one. And he engaged them with warmth, generosity, and genuine curiosity, as a fellow human from whom he had something important to learn. Like all brilliant teachers, he was never condescending, never didactic, never enamored of the imagined virtue of his own expertise. Instead, he was generous with his attention, believed in the power of the learner's mind, and trusted that the rest would follow.

Beyond the value of his writings about education, and the values he himself embodied, Mike also gifted us with an example of what a career as a professional academic—and in particular, as a theorist and practitioner of literacy and learning—could look like. Some fifteen years ago (!), I was invited to write a review of a new volume of Mike's collected works, *An Open Language: Selected Writing on Literacy, Learning, and Opportunity*. That invitation, too, was a gift, as it gave me the opportunity to sit with a body of work in a dwelling-in (rather than looking-across) way I typically didn't have the occasion to do. I noted in that piece ("Looking Back at the Road Ahead") that Mike's writing addressed "cognitive processes, writing programs, composition textbooks, schools, workplaces, literacy theory, and educational policy." I also wrote that Mike approached these subjects with "a fully packed kit of methodological equipment, from protocol analysis to case study to long-term participant observation," and that his body of work thus far showed him "tacking back and forth between macro and micro views of writing and literacy, between groups and individuals, between in- and out-of-school settings" (72). Spending time with Mike's work over time revealed just how little he was motivated by academic opportunism, aspirationalism, or the seductions of extractive research. Rather, his imagination was animated by the experience (his own, and those of others) of being an educational subject (and agent), institutional predicaments of education, and common narratives of schools, schooling, and students. I remember thinking, as I worked on that review, just how rare Mike's approach

to learning and scholarly production really was. Of *An Open Language*, I wrote:

For all the research and scholarship we produce, it isn't often that a single work allows us to experience the expansive terrain of composition studies as a field of inquiry and practice, to sit in the passenger's seat of the car as it bumps along over the ground in the shallow tracks of an emerging road, seeing what the driver sees and listening to him think aloud about how to go next. For those of us just starting out, Rose's work helps us to envision something we have no resources to yet imagine: how, indeed, can a single life of inquiry in this field unfold? For those of us who have been working in the field for many years, the book is in fact an important retrospective on how the road might once have looked as it emerged *then* and *there*, encouraging us to reflect on the meaning of paths made and roads not taken (71).

Mike's particular journey, it seemed to me, defined the landscape of the field in which we worked, even as it marked out an altogether distinctive pathway. But then, if you saw (as Mike did) education as a deeply human project, it follows that you would be inclined to be attentive to what the humans engaged in the project of education—as agents or subjects—might have to teach you. You would ask the question, always, what does it mean to be a human being who is implicated in education? What kinds of humans are implicated, and which ways? To what effects? And how can education be (re)conceived as a (more) humane endeavor? I feel Mike's death a loss not only of an exceptional human, but also of a future. It's impossible not to wonder what more might Mike have gifted us, in these terribly difficult (“challenging,” as administrators like to say) times. Indeed, it is possible to identify a throughline from many of our current conversations relevant to equity and inclusion back to the basic principles of social justice Mike articulated as educational principles in, and ever since the publication of, *Lives on the Boundary*.

Mike Rose has given us so very much. In spite of that—and also because of it—the news of his passing felt like yet another one of 2021's malicious turns of fate. In his November 2020 blog post, Mike wrote:

In this season of giving thanks and expressing gratitude, there is much I am thankful for.

I am thankful for you, the readers of this blog, and thankful for all my readers in any medium.

To have something you've written read by others is a great honor.

I'm thankful for the expulsion from the presidency of my country a cloven-footed, grotesquely evil man.

I'm thankful for my many friendships and deep relationships, which sustain me and give my life profound meaning.

I'm thankful for teaching, which I fell into by dumb luck at 24. Teaching defines me and gives my life purpose, and I am fortunate beyond words to love it as much now as I did upon discovering it.

I'm thankful to be able to write—it gives me an absorbing craft and a way to be in the world.

Me, I'm thankful that *we* had, in our lives and in our hearts, this example of an intellectual leader who had the grace and humility to be thankful to all those to whom he gave so much.

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