

Director's Report

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Recently I saw a production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” Shakespeare’s comedy that tells the story of both fairies and foolish mortals during the magic of one summer’s night.

What sorts of changes occur? Fairy juice is laid upon sleeping eyes, hearts are broken and repaired. A band of common folk form themselves into an acting troupe. A fairy queen falls in love with Bottom the Weaver, a man transformed into an ass. When the revels all have ended, the players return to their original form: smitten lovers, bemused townsfolk, regal queens and kings.

When the curtain descends at the end of the play, all the loose ends are neatly tied together, but the characters are no wiser than they were when the play began. Outside forces transform the characters during the course of the play, but as the curtain falls, as befits a comedy, there is no growth, no deepening of character. The audience may see more deeply into themselves as a result of watching the antics on stage—a poignant remembrance of young love, a rekindled sense of magic, an understanding of the fickleness of the heart, the value of kindness, the pain of class consciousness, and we come away transformed even if the characters themselves do not.

As I sat in the audience, I thought about my freshman students. The young people cavorting on stage are not much older than the young people in my classes. And like many of them, they are much more interested in affairs of the heart than of the pen, of outer rather than inner transformation. They are mainly interested in the hunt for true love which is product, rather than process-driven. They may try external revision; a new haircut, piercing, or outfit in their quest to revise themselves, but I wonder how many are willing or

able to go deeper than that. Was I any different at their age? Was I ever that young? Had I been ready for a transformation then?

As a freshman, I remember being exhilarated at the freedom and opportunities that college offered, but terrified by the difficult required courses that lay ahead: statistics, economics, physics. I was unready for change, too scared and uninformed then to revise my life. I was not ready to find out who I was.

What does it mean to be ready? In education, much is made of reading and math readiness, the point at which a child is mentally prepared to begin learning a subject. We don’t hear much, though, about readiness to write, to revise, to transform. The Indo-European root for ready is *reidh-*, which means to ride. The word evolves from the idea of being prepared for a journey. This original intent of the word uncovers a clear connection to education, that in order to change and grow through exposure to new ideas, we must be prepared for the journey; we can’t just go along for the ride.

Revision readiness, then, is an important prerequisite for the journey not only through freshman composition, but also through college and through life itself. Some of my students seem eager to please, while others balk at the requirements and would be much happier in a non-revision-based class. None of them expect the journey that they are beginning. The student-travelers, and the teacher as well, find themselves in a liminal place, a threshold, a place where, literally, they may be thrashed. The word threshold derives from the word for the place where wheat was thrashed, where grain and seeds were separated from the straw. At a place such as this, we are at the same time vulnerable yet receptive, ready to move past, but oddly encumbered and afraid to let go of the familiar.

According to an ancient Native American myth, to find our life we must prepare ourselves through sacrifice for our journey, to be cleansed and strengthened in our hearts so that we can be reborn into a world of balance and harmony. The key to success in any journey is to be prepared for it in body, mind, and spirit. The Zen Buddhists must have had education in mind when they realized that the journey is more important than the destination.

