

# Why Do I Write? - It is not because of the influence of a professor

**Anthony Paul Griffin**

Years ago, when I was addicted to CSPAN, I was watching an interview of Antonin Scalia, a long sitting United States Supreme Court Justice. Justice Scalia is known for his conservative views in reading constitutional text. He has repeatedly described himself as being an originalist, meaning he takes the original text of the Constitution, written generations ago, and purports to deviate little from the drafters' original intent. When I first heard His Honor's analysis years ago, my minority paranoia struck and reminded me that when the original text of the United States Constitution was drafted – people like me were enslaved.

When Justice Scalia finished his speech, one of the audience members posed a question I always wanted to ask of him. The question was rather simplistic, “but if you persists in your analysis where does that leave the rest of us?” For those of you who do not speak academia or prefer not to speak in such a manner, the translation is one I can provide. Any such interpretation leaves out slaves being counted as three-fifths of a person in the original constitution, the right to vote was accorded to a select few, ownership of property was likewise restricted. Antonin Scalia, not a shy man, and one possessive of a rather distinctive voice told the questioner to “get your own revolution”. The audience roared approvingly. I stopped what I doing, looked up at the monitor and intoned, “You're absolutely right.”

Recently while sitting in an auditorium in San Antonio with other grandparents, while Ethan fidgeted, we, his grandparents, surrounded him watching him fidget and pick. We also observed our surroundings and commented on those who in turn surrounded us.

“Her hair is pretty.”

“It is.”

“My - a room full of proud women.”

“I discovered San Antonio differs from Houston, they enhance their natural hair colors and use little dye, an enhancer, but little dye.”

“Really?”

A stranger to our left, when ushering her child quickly assumed her role as mother [ والدة ] when she realized her child said goodbye without ever taking her eyes off her computer. She turned her around, told her to put the computer away, instructed her to raise eyes and “look” [ حث ] at the relatives who were staying put. She said all of this in another language, with a voice tone and inflection which required no translation [ يس الآن ! ].

Another grandparent sat to our right who appeared to possess the souls of many countries in her eyes, while possessing the skin color and dominate features of the continent of Asia. Her granddaughter had hair like mine, which was complimented with the dominate coloring of Europe. To their left, and directly in front of us, was a parent who had no control over her small child, whom she thought was cuter than he was. We, of different hues and faiths, shared glances of the “Oh Lord” variety, a glance of disdain which had nothing to do with her race or skin, which looked like mine. Some moved to different chairs to better hear the presenter; others of us enjoyed our moment of shared contempt.

This generation of children, sitting near their grandparents, will have to be taught what separate but equal was and in the same context, hopefully, learn there is much work to do. On that day I watched Scalia so brilliantly dissect his questioner with his answer and non-answer, I was shocked by his truth. On that day in San Antonio, Texas, I knew the revolution playing out in front of us need not be televised.

### **SHE ENCOURAGED US TO FLY OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST**

When sitting in New York preparing to speak at the Hugh Hefner Foundation Awards Dinner, my then agent leaned closer and told me that she had sent my manuscript to her friend who was black. The year was 1997. I had been requested by Christi Hefner, the President of Playboy, the Hugh Hefner Foundation and Playboy Enterprises to be present. The program was in dedication to Supreme Court Justice William Brennan who had died in June of the same year. I was there to set the occasion. While Christi spoke, she spoke of my having received an award from the Hugh Hefner Foundation in 1994 and serving as one of the Judges for the 1997 Awards. She stood a mere twenty feet away, my mind raced with my agent's assessment. I said nothing. At the end of the program I thank my then agent and her friend for their assessment. When I travelled back to the Houston area, I requested my staff send a copy of the manuscript to a former professor. She would serve as my guide.

The class was called Counterculture, a study of the writings of individuals who comprised the counterculture of the nineteen sixties. Ken Kesey, Allen Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac were some of the writers studied. We were required to read, understand what other authors influenced those studied and then write about what we read and integrate the wealth of information which came from the lectures. The class was probably the third or fourth class I elected to take with this particular professor. Her name is Sherry Zivley.

Her lectures were crisp, her expectations were clear – preparation (read, read, read) and a requirement you write. She possessed an appreciation and enthusiasm of the written word, an enthusiasm which moved from her feet, coursed through her body and came forth through her

flailing arms, a high-pitched voice replaced her normal calm. A light giggle told others her appreciation for a student's insight. "My, my" were her tell-tale words. Her joy was not because the student got the answer right, an enthusiasm displayed because the student made her think. The class was dominated by particular majors - English, Education and Journalism, all professions in which the written word was part and parcel of their professions. I assumed she never noticed me in the earlier entry level courses – I came and went, never had a long conversation with her, received my grade and assessed whether her classes were of any benefit to me. In hindsight, my repeated enrollment in her classes revealed I concluded there was a benefit, even though the more classes I took the more those other majors dominated the landscape.

We were required to read one or two novels a week, followed by a paper. At the end of the semester, we were required to write a final paper, discussing each author and their works. How did their works relate to each other? How were they different? In what manner did each represent the counterculture? I submitted a final paper taking a contrarian view. I argued none of the writers actually represented the counterculture. I described them as creatures of privilege, hippies who were free to have a life of youthful protest and escape to privilege when they became bored, aged or tired. I cited their words and used them against them. In return for my hard work I received an invitation to the professor's office.

"Well, an interesting paper I must say. When I initially read the paper, my, my ...."

Sherry Zivley delivered her observations in a low deliberative voice. In my required visit she didn't threaten me, as others had. After a brief discussion she wrote a grade on my paper, smiled and excused me to go about my way. Her reaction differed from my Chemistry teacher in high school who threatened to fail me if I didn't drop her class. My grades at the time averaged out at 95, with precious little time left in the semester. She had tired of my asking questions,

challenging established theorems. She made it clear I should accept the established theorems, as if asking questions was a revolutionary act. I dropped her class as instructed. After dropping I realized I had been intimidated by her, I promised myself never to be intimidated again by any teacher.

Professor Zivley's reaction was also not the same reaction as her colleague who taught a class called the Age of Romanticism. When I openly questioned whether the romanticism assigned to this particular period of English literature was fraught with hypocrisy, particularly when the authors failed to discuss the plight of the people of Europe and their colonial subjects, the professor was none too pleased with my comment. I think you see a pattern being formed. The professor's comment on my comment was an adverse grade. She wrote on the paper the grade was lowered because of my comment. I felt my inquiry was no different from the assigned role of any student, at least I thought. I simply wanted to know how the subject matter related to my world, my history. We were instructed, when we entered the institution, to explore ideas, challenge doctrines, seek and determine truths – I listened and took the challenge to heart. I appealed the grade assigned by the insulted professor, who taught her classes in period attire. My searching the catalog for Professor Zivley's next upper-level course was a natural reaction to Professor of the Age of Romance.

My anonymity disappeared after I handed in my assignment to Professor Zivley. When she called me to her office to discuss my views, I did. She instructed us to fly over the cuckoo's nest, I only accepted her challenge. The same challenge which followed me to the law school and to practice. When I was asked to teach an Upward Bound class during the Summer I called Professor Zivley. When we talked in subsequent years, she seldom talked about the practice. She talked about the state of education, whether the high school students were being properly

prepared for the college curriculum. She asked for suggestions. She also inquired whether I was reading.

When Joyce Carole Oakes published her first novel, I was told to pick up a copy and read it, as well as her second, third, fourth. I did. She talked about promising writers with a suggestion I make like discovery. I did. When I needed an ear, the same way she listened when she called me into her office. She did. Sherry Zivley is why I write.

### **RESILENCE WRAPPED IN PRINCIPLES**

She was a Master's Teaching Assistant in the History Department, commonly referred to as T.A.'s on campus. Her class was an African American Studies' class. She appeared to be a little nervous during the first class, as were we. Her name was Veronica Jacobs. Some of the men in the class whispered to each other about the T.A., her skin (color of cocoa), her hair (the color of her skin) and her body. There were at least five or six students in the class who were football players, at least their size and attire told as much. She told us her expectations - attendance was one, class participation was another, and being prepared was the third. When she finished her introduction, I concluded her nervousness was not just nervousness - she too was excited to be there.

“We should have fun.”

The vast majority of students sitting in her class were the beneficiaries of the civil rights movements being played out across the country. The African American Studies' classes were a component of the Department of History and established in response to students' and societal demands for the institutions of higher learning to be more responsive, more inclusive. The

African American students on campus in the early nineteen seventies were few; we knew each other by face or name. The palpable excitement seen in our T.A. was understandable.

On day two of the class, the whispers still existed. After the roll was called the T.A. recognized there was only one of the football players remained. He didn't know where the others were. She repeated her requirements and continued on with the class. This went on for a week or two. The whispers about hair, color and body now changed. "They're football players." "He is an All-American." "Bet she won't." She did.

The Athletic Department tried to correct what they called a misunderstanding. "No misunderstanding, they never attended class, never turned in an assignment." The Department pressured her. "I understand. You can change the grades, but I'm not changing the grade." She didn't.

Veronica Jacobs eventually left the world of academia. Over the years I have always fairly and unfairly treated her as my T.A. But that is not why I write. She like Sherry Zivley provided the foundations good teachers provide students, and hopefully in our lifetime it is not just one. A good teacher inspires us, makes us want to fly over the moon, solve scientific solutions, pen poetry, write great novels and explore the unknown. Veronica took of her time and sat in those Upward Bound classes and helped me tear down fences preventing the students from believing. She also helped me rebuild their belief structures. She is why I write.

She has served the role of cynic ("to keep you grounded"). She has provided a place to find clarity, a role all teachers provide. We have shared the death of love ones. A product of Houston, she shared stories of Third and Fifth Wards, of Sunnyside. She laughed about her grandmother's backhand slap when she commented on her "good hair" ("you know the only thing you got going for you is your 'good hair'"), all part and parcel of her family tree from

Louisiana, and the historically explainable self-hate we have been so cursed to hurdle on a daily basis.

Veronica never told me why she distanced herself from the Houston civil rights groups, well not the underlying facts. While sitting in grass on campus one day she conveyed her insult. Hers was an insult grounded in sexism.

“I can’t always be the secretary.”

“We can’t always be relegated to the menial task.”

“He is not about civil rights or equal rights; he is about himself and sex.”

Who she spoke of was not important to our discussions. Her frustrations and observations were rooted in about sexism. She provided the same guidance on other matters, including her abhorrence towards domestic violence, and on self-respect (she coined the phrase Sunday shoe, as in “I ain’t a Sunday Shoe” when referencing a mate). She assumed the burden of her family members and extended family members, sometimes to her detriment. Something told me that was all part what a good teacher does.

As those fifth graders in San Antonio scurried to their classes, I wondered what teacher would touch their lives and make them want to scale every mountain. I also hoped they never let a misguided teacher trample their flame.



## **JE NE SAIS PAS**

I sat between the number one and two ranked students in my high school. I didn't know their ranking until late in the first semester. Only percentage points separated them. The number two student was intent of making up ground. The number one student, Vicky Hardy, told me it was her intent not to be number one. Vicky had calculated the grades she had to make to drop her average in order to lose an honor she didn't desire.

“She wants it so much.”

The class was French III. I don't remember the teacher's name. When grades were issued for the semester, I was given a C in the class. When I informed the teacher my test scores averaged to a mid-level A; he agreed.

“If you agree, then why was I given C?”

“I don't like your attitude.”

“What?”

“I don't like your attitude.”

“Really, you lowered my grade because of my attitude?”

“I did. There is nothing you can do about it. The administration will back me on grades.”

I found nothing in the rules allowing him to lower my grade to such an extent because of citizenship. When I asked he give me examples of my bad attitude, he couldn't. I decided not to complain further, not to tell my mother, nor did I contemplate going the administration. I decided to accept the C and handle it. *Je ne sais pas.*

If he wanted bad attitude I was going to give him a bad attitude. I shared with Vicky what had occurred. She couldn't believe my grade, so I showed her. After I showed her mine,

she showed me hers. Her recommendation was to complain to the school administration, I ignored her recommendation. *Je ne sais pas.*

We were told on the first day of class that if we were to learn French and become fluent speakers, we were to immerse ourselves in the language. Few in the class attempted to speak only French while in the confines in the classroom – well number one and two did, but few else. From the day I was given my grade, my decision was to engage in a verbal war with my teacher, in French no less. My intent was to make my point and never speak this Godforsaken language again.

“Je ne comprends pas ce que vous venez de dire?”  
[“I don’t understand what you just said?”]

“Pourquoi?”  
[“Why?”]

“Votre conjugaison est mal!”  
[Your conjugation is wrong!]

Our exchange would go on for two to three minutes before he broke his own rules and started speaking English. I continued to speak French and never let up. He should have expelled Vicky. She laughed audibly when the daily verbal exchange began. Others sat there dumbfounded trying to catch up.

The teacher was a thin man, with a non-athletic build. He tossed his body around the room, as if he was a puppet; he held his head in his hands. He failed woefully in not showing my new bad attitude was causing him to have a conniption fit. Frankly, the man wasn’t all that good of speaker of the language.

My tutor was a native speaker, the mother of Laura Gangluff, a classmate whose mother was from France. Laura was born in Australia and this was her first year in Baytown. Laura’s

father was the President of Baytown Exxon USA. Since the beginning of the semester, Laura extended an invitation to visit their home every Sunday to speak French with Mrs. Gangluff. I pushed and pushed and pushed the bad French speaking teacher until he screamed one day, “I will changed the grade.” “No thank you” was my response.

I received a grade of A the next semester. Vicky Hardy’s stomach was the worse for my exercise in retribution. Unfortunately, I lost the love of the language. I never spoke it again, never took another class. The same way the Chemistry teacher drove me away from Chemistry. The same way the Biology teacher questioned openly why I asked so many questions. He also questioned why I wasn’t like two other black students in the class who were “quiet and nice” (his words) – they too were good students. I responded to him how shocked I was by his question, being this was a biology class – “my mother’s name is Georgia and my father’s name is Leon. It is because of biology sir.” I never took another biology class after that, even though I aced the course.

I write because I know I am not the only student whose flame has been extinguished by one in authority. I write to tell their stories. We have been labeled recalcitrant, troublemakers, categorized as attention deficit, retarded, Special Ed. We were labeled as labeled as coded as disadvantaged, criminalized and expelled. I asked questions because I studied all the time, late at night, early in the morning, and knew the answer before I asked the question. I watched the world change in front of my eyes, on television, in books, all while the experiment of integration was playing out in Baytown, Texas and throughout the South.

We could not be as smart, even when it wasn’t said, we felt it. Minor infractions caused us to be expelled from the school. We were assaulted by others students and the administration did nothing. Our grades were lowered and or we were removed from advance level courses. We

were told we were not as smart, not as bright, from the wrong neighborhood. Absolutely, I wasn't the prototypical student. My hair was too long. I hung around "all my friends". I worked with other students planning how to change our environment. Before I left Baytown Sterling we persuaded practically all of the black students to cease participation in sports, band and any other form of extra-curriculum activities until changes were made. The boycott lasted for two years.

I felt comfortable with no one knowing the grades I made and I wasn't telling. At least I assumed no one knew. I graduated from high school in three years. In my last year, early into the semester, I was instructed to come to the Principal's office. The announcement was over the loudspeaker. When walking down the hallway I thought of all the planning I had engaged in to accomplish our goals, the things I had done which were questionable ("a good way to parse words without an admission") and wondered to myself, "how they knew" (well, I'm honest). When I entered the suite, I was directed to see Mr. Harmon, the counselor. Mr. Harmon sat across from his desk and asked I take a seat. He of brown skin, an administrator from the now closed segregated school, George Washington Carver, had in his hands my class schedule and grades. His wanted to remove me from all my classes, and place me in vocational training (welding). "So you may obtain gainful employment." There is no need for French III. There is no need for Advanced English, and the speech course is an absolute waste of your time. I listened, thanked him for his recommendation, and went back to class. I never told my mother about this encounter either – she had other worries and there was no need to tell if my answer was "no." Every time I made the Dean's List in College, every time I obtained a degree or an honor, I travelled to Baytown, Texas and asked to see Mr. Harmon. He would never see me. I always left him a copy. "Give him my regards."

I write because these secrets have to be told. I wasn't the only one. These practices have not ceased because I escaped the Mr. Bad Speaking French Teacher and a black man full of the same hate. More importantly, I don't write because of the influence of "a" professor. I write to tell the influence of many.