

TEACHER TO TEACHER: A LETTER TO EDGAR FRIEDENBERG

BY TERRY TODD

Katallagete 4(Fall-Winter 1972): 66-71.

*Preface: Terry began teaching at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, in 1969, and bought twenty acres of land with an old gristmill that had been converted into a home shortly thereafter. Terry lived in the expansive Rum Creek Millhouse—as it was known—with his wife, Jean Ford; his sister, Connie; her husband, Frank Ray (who also taught at Mercer); and their son, Timothy. By 1972 when this was written, Terry had largely set aside his interest in powerlifting and was playing tennis again. He had become interested in organic and subsistence farming and his intellectual focus had shifted to the plight of America’s schools. At a summer institute he attended at Harvard University in 1970, Terry became friends with the brilliant sociologist Edgar Z. Friedenberg, whose books on the problems of the educational system ignited much debate in this era and caused many educators to question their role as teachers and professors. Several years after their first meeting, in a small journal called *Katallagete*, Terry and Edgar published a pair of letters that reflect Terry’s growing conflict and his attempts to find meaning in his life as a professor. At the time this was written, Edgar was a faculty member at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and it was because of our friendship with Edgar that Terry and I moved to Nova Scotia in 1975 where he also joined the faculty at Dalhousie. Because of space limitations, I am only reprinting Terry’s letter.*

~ Jan Todd



Dear Edgar: Early last month, when you and Judy and Bev visited us here at the Millhouse, we talked about a good many things, almost all of which bore at least a tangential connection to what I hope to make the heart of this letter. Maybe we can talk of this again when I come up to see you in Nova Scotia later in the Fall, but for now let me start out by trying to tell you a little more about the interrelationship between my home here in the country, my work at the university, my family, and me than I told you when you were down.

About three miles west of here Little Deer Creek crosses the old Taylor place and then joins with and becomes Deer Creek which continues on through the woods until it gathers strength by merging with and becoming Rum Creek which runs as you know almost under my house. We had a good rain last evening and so the sound of falling water that Judy said was like a steady surf comes to me full-voiced as I sit at my table by the open window. It’s the first of September in Georgia and the wind has with it the first edge of Fall. All of my family—Jean; my

brother-in-law Frank; my sister, Connie; and my nephew, Timothy—are asleep now as it is very late and so I am alone with the sound of falling water, the smell of late summer, and the task of shaping from words some semblance of myself.

I’m not sure I know how to do this. One thing I do know is that this wonderful old Millhouse and the land and stream accompanying it are beautiful to me in a way beyond my skill to tell. I know another thing. I know that they would almost surely not be registered in my name at the Monroe County courthouse had I not undergone the process (Do you recall the use of the word “process” to describe the hair treatment used by black folks to punish and manipulate their hair until it behaved in a way quite obviously contrary to its nature?) of higher education.

One thing I don’t know or at least can’t justify is how a person no older than I and possessing no inherited wealth could, leaving aside should, possibly own such a piece of property. Had I learned in college anything that, on its own, a reasonable man might consider valuable, perhaps I could begin to understand or even justify my



Terry sitting in the quadrangle of Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, in the fall of 1972.

ownership of house and land; but of course I learned nothing of the sort. What I did learn was that there was a direct connection between being in college and ever having the choice of owning such a place. Only later, after I left school and began my education, did I begin to see some of the implications of what I had learned. You were chief ophthalmologist.

And here I finally am with you, sitting upwind from the ass-end of the lectern, growing increasingly leery of my role as professor or, more precisely, of the role of professor. You remember, I'm sure, how Boaz explained himself to Unc in Vonnegut's *The Sirens of Titan* by saying that, "I found me a place where I can do good without doing any harm, and I can see I'm doing it, and then I'm doing good for know I'm doing it..." Barely credible as it may now seem, I actually did have a couple of years in which I believed that in college teaching I had found me such a place. So long ago.

I guess what brought it all home for the first time was an experience I had with a small class of undergraduate students at Auburn University a few years back. They were what would be called in some circles an "ide-

al" class—meaning, I suppose, that they were enthusiastic, bright, worked well together, and seemed genuinely to like my way of handling things. As an ironic validation of this, I was told subsequent to the end of the quarter that the class had drawn up and unanimously signed a statement addressed to the dean which said that they had learned more from the course than from any course they'd ever had, that they had also enjoyed themselves enormously, and that I was the best instructor under which it had ever been their privilege to study, etc. etc. The dean himself showed the statement to me under circumstances which, had I known them would have at that time been puzzling to me. The circumstances were that the very same dean who proudly shared with me the students' praise was simultaneously in the process (there's that word again) of assisting in the arrangement of events which would leave me with very little choice but to resign, establishing once again the fact that if you have a bit of conceptual dissonance that needs handling, get ahold of an administrator of any of our modern institutions and he can, I guarantee, take care of bidness. They sure took care of mine. Reminiscent of Nixon eulogizing the war dead. Or Crisswell sermonizing on reconciliation. Or Todd placing *Deschooling Society* on the reading list for his course (required for teacher certification) in Foundations of Education.

The point of all this is not, God knows, to trot out my liberal credentials, but to frame the background for a discussion of a little conceptual dissonance of my own. In the midst of my Boaz period when I was shown the statement the students had written, I found myself one day happily reviewing, in light of the statement, the events of the class when I remembered something I'd selectively forgotten. I remembered that one morning during the previous quarter after what had seemed to me to be an exceptionally successful class, I asked the students to decide what we should do the next day—go more deeply into what we'd be animatedly discussing or simply take a day off. Guess what they decided? I tried it again later in the quarter with the same result.

In my review of all this after the quarter, the unanimity and vigor of the vote for holiday began more and more to collide with the substance of the students' statement until finally even an old boy like me, kinda slow and all eat up with hubris to boot, began to put it together. The fact of the business is that a group of 15 young people, mostly seniors, who were supposed to be attending the university to gain wisdom, insight and reflectivity, when

presented with a choice between attending a class which they unanimously agreed was the best they'd ever had and not attending the class, chose, every manjack there, not to attend. And you know what, Edgar? I was glad. And once I understood the one thing and admitted the other, I've been a changed man. So it goes.

To be truthful, I'll admit that I tried a few times to get back into my Boaz mood, but my heart, the *sine qua non* of a Boaz mood, just wasn't in it. Given that analysis, what does a man do? I'd already blown my big chance several years before by saying no to a filthy lucrative contract to enter professional wrestling. I turned it down because I felt called to become an educator. Professional wrestling might have made an honest man of me. But Edgar, when you're too old to break into the wrestling circuit and your eyes have widened to include a view of the function of other institutions, what do you do? Nothing on the outside that I could do looks much good. As you mentioned the other day in response to my remark that institutions these days just couldn't bear the load they were asked to bear, bearing the load may be less of a problem than the fact that no matter what load you're bearing and where you're going, there's already too much of it there when you arrive. A sort of universalized Newcastle.

As I told you last month, I'd just as soon be Fred Wiseman as anyone, but I just don't have the courage to strike out on my own as he did. I am trying to do a little work on my courage these days, but it's mighty hard when you've paid as much of it out in tuition over the years as I have. Having the horizontally extended family that we have here at the Millhouse seems to me to be good for what ails all of us. It's especially good for me because I'm able to learn from my brother-in-law, Frank, who knows so much about so many physical things, but it helps us all because we learn to share the chores, we ride together to work, we try to become more considerate, and we talk these things out from time to time as we go along. We're trying to learn what our limits are for sharing, independence, and doing-without, so that we can begin to extend these limits little by little. We've seen so many folks come to grief by picking up more than they could pack off that we decided to do our best to find out what we could and couldn't do so that by doing what we could and sustaining one another we might be able to turn some couldn'ts into coulds. All very easy to say, of course, and quite probably self-serving, but it seems to make at least a little sense and so here we are. Of course we all get our feelings hurt once in a while and either sully up or holler,



The Millhouse during a rare snowstorm in Central Georgia. When it was a working mill, the waterwheel was located behind the heavy pilings supporting the first floor and a millrace brought water to it from Rum Creek. Below, Terry and our dog, Muffin, explore Rum Creek behind the house.

depending on our style. I sully.

Being in the country is another aspect of my courage training. Having a little land to work, some woods to walk, a few animals to watch grow and the responsibility that it all entails all seem to me to be healthy. And it's good to have a place like this to share with your friends. All of these things may not be scientific objectives, but they do seem worthwhile. I have a friend back in Texas, Edgar, who recently left college teaching and work on his dissertation because he said he began to feel he was paying a price he couldn't afford. He has a little tree trimming business now and has bought himself about 40 acres of bottom land on which he's planted several hundred pecan trees. He works hard at his job and he told me that it pleased him to be able to give a little more life to a tree and to be able to feel the pride of being fairly paid for a good day's work. He's doing a little poetry again. I've known him all my life and I've never seen him more at home with himself than he is now. I wish I was as much of a man.

But I'm not and may never be and so I'm back again to the same question I've answered up to now by a



yearly decision to remain within the institutional womb. I feel a bit like the farmhand who mused to himself one hot day while chopping a long row of cotton that, “You know, this sun’s so hot, and this work’s so hard, I believe I’m called to preach.” So I remain in the institution, scuffling to make do. Whether this decision to remain results from a legitimate social philosophy, rationally arrived at after having carefully weighed the alternatives or from Marcuse’s one dimensionality, what with the Millhouse and all, I’m not sure. But the closer I look, the flatter I appear. I’ve been getting by for the most part simply by trying to make my work and the work of those with whom I share my life space a little better. I’ve drastically lowered my expectations. Of just about everything.

In that regard, I do, however, still believe that the words “better” and “worse” have some contextual importance in an educational institution. One of the few things happening now on our campus that seems positive is that there appears to be more discussion among both faculty and students about a matter that should be the driving wheel of any university—the nature of education. I am now asked, by more students than used to ask, my views on whether or not I regard as mutually exclusive the term “college education.” In response, I can say, do say and hope to be able to continue saying that although college does lie on a dark prairie, there are fires to be found at which warmth and sustenance can be had for the asking. And that these fires may or may not—but probably won’t—have much or anything to do with classroom work or outside arguments. And that these fires are not so numerous that chance should be trusted to turn them up. And that turning them up may require sacrifice. And that to receive maximum warmth and sustenance from those who find will almost surely necessitate a certain disregard for the regular academic program. And that this disregard has a price. And that this price should be paid. And that the average institution, such as a college, one might chance to meet in this technolotrous society is without question a dangerous mother and should be seen for what it is and resisted, as its aims are almost always in direct opposition to the enhancement and survival of any and all opportunities to make true and human use of our human minds and bodies. And, finally, that the students may 1) take what I say and use all or any part of it they want, 2) accept it *cum grano salis*, or 3) reject it completely.

A majority of the students thrown by fate and the computer into contact with me opt for either #2 or #3 above for a variety of reasons not the least of which is

that, as any physiologist will tell you, twelve or fourteen years of confinement and inactivity tends to cause stiffness and frailty instead of flexibility and strength. But you do what you can. You arrange a variety of outside experiences in the schools for your students so that they can see more objectively the system through which they have come and how that system has both helped to make them what they are and hindered them from becoming what they might have been. You remember how you were yourself that first year in college and how much you wish someone had said to you then what you now try to say as clearly as you know how to these young folks with whom your life intersects and you say these things even though you suspect you would probably have heard no more willingly than they. But you do what you can out of a combination of concern for all of your students, hope for what some of them (and you can’t always tell which ones) may become, and resentment for the years you might have put to better use.

In the Fall of the year 1972 Mercer looks, because of this discussion, just a little bit better to me than she did a year ago. For whatever reason, that’s not an easy statement to make about an institution these days. Now that’s not to say that I think this discussion will result in anything serious being done at this institution. You can, after all, eat only so much of your own foot. But it is better than it was and I believe I can live with that. At least for a little while longer.

Edgar, I’ve read and listened to you long enough to know that you don’t sit all that easy in your endowed chair up at Dalhousie, and as I deal as best I can with the dilemmas of our profession, I often wonder how you’ve handled them over the years and how you handle them now. When you told me sadly that the freedom and self-determined grading procedures you gave the students your first year at Dal had attracted such a high percentage of second year rip-offs that you had decided to give some quizzes and other required work this year, my suspicion that insight into a problem doesn’t necessarily include the problem’s solution was confirmed. But then I never loved you because of your solutions.

I think I’ll go downstairs now and fry some sausage and decide how to spend the rest of the day. I hope this letter finds you and your fine young folks well, and that my remarks provide at least a point of departure for your own analysis of how you’re bearing up after 20 some years as a member of the world’s second oldest profession.

