

The Old Fanatic Died Last Week

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i

A quiet graveside ceremony marked the end of her seventy-four years in the community.

A minister read from *The Trick Is to Keep Breathing*, quoted the twenty-third Psalm, and lowered his head in prayer.

A friend glanced toward the heavens as the body was lowered into the ground.

A former student wondered if her long nights were worth the ignoble end.

A companion from the nursing home looked aimlessly at the ground.

A family member dried her eyes as she glanced back a final time.

A stranger stood silently as others walked away.

A former colleague smiled as she thought of her energy, enthusiasm, empathy, and courage.

ii

An indifferent few in the common room commented on her final years.

A fussy spot demanded, "I want her room after it's emptied and cleaned. I should have had it all along."

A cynic murmured, "Take everything as far as I'm concerned. I'm glad she's gone. She was too emotional: too open with her tears, too generous with her means, too forthright with her views, too passionate about her ideals, too tender with the young. But all of that was put-on. She never did anything for me."

A housekeeper added, “She was really just a nutcase, someone who wanted to create other ‘educated people’—fanatics—to ruin our community. I heard people talk about her, but I wasn’t impressed. She didn’t do anything but mess up the bed and floor. Stank like the custodian’s breath.”

A frequent visitor commented, “She thought she was helping the powerless and promoting respect and justice. She tried to excite students but was just a bore.”

A new arrival wondered, “Is she the one who fought with the school administration? Didn’t she have any commonsense?”

A resident questioned, “She used to talk about what she taught and how she initiated students into reflection and imagination. Did she ever reflect on the fact that we thought she was an idiot?!”

A grandmother injected, “We need more like her. I trusted her with my children and grandchildren. She was interested in them, not just earning a salary. She led them to think for themselves and care for others.”

iii

A staffroom filled as educational colleagues shared a break and spoke of her final teaching years.

A supervisor observed, “She didn’t listen. Never would accept advice.”

A director claimed, “You couldn’t force her to use the curriculum guides.”

An administrator exhaled, “She was one of the worst—insubordinate, subversive, untamable.”

An admirer countered, “She cared deeply for her students, profoundly for the subjects that she taught. Educationally, she was worth ten of our average teachers.”

A somewhat puzzled trainee observed, “Well, she’s out of everyone’s way now. So who cares what she did or didn’t do?”

A long timer noted, “Thankfully, we replaced her long ago with someone who does what she’s told.”

A friend inserted, “Oh, she wasn’t that bad. If we had let her use her mind and gifts, she would have been fine. She’ll be remembered long after we are forgotten.”

A retiree added, “Yeah. Kids were prepared to think, discuss, and write when they left her courses. How many of us were that successful?”

iv

A group of friends reminisced about the passing of an icon.

A shopkeeper observed, "The obituary didn't mention that she had ruined the lives of seven million families by requiring that her pupils study for her tests and rewrite papers *on weekends!*"

A maître d' exclaimed, "Or that she expected us to attend parent conferences and school meetings!"

A mother noted, "And that she gave *us* Fs if we didn't work with our children on their—*her*—projects!"

A barman sighed, "I hated it when she'd say, 'Anyone can get pregnant or inject sperm. It takes reflective parents to hatch some worthwhile ideas and dispositions in their children.'"

A wag noted, "She should have been more comfortable with ignorance and incompetence, especially Doug's and mine!"

A police officer remembered, "She did more for Roberto than anyone except his marathon coach. I can't thank her enough."

A hairstylist claimed, "If it hadn't been for her, Letitia wouldn't have gone to university. She'd still be standing on the corner."

An car mechanic said, "She helped create in Melanie a sense of pride in who she was and whatever she did, not just in the school things."

V

A small group paused before returning to their everyday affairs.

An accountant admitted, "She was a pain, but I never doubted that she pushed me for my own good. It was."

An engineer ruminated, "She's the only teacher I had who gave me a lousy grade. She claimed it was because I was in an academic coma and that my essay proved it!"

A nurse noted, "Her standards were ludicrous. She was too strict, too demanding, but I learned a lot and finally graduated."

And a barrister confessed, "She was a witch with words, but a wizard when it came to getting you to think, question, inquire, and argue."

An electrician gushed, "She changed my life by who she was—caring, honest, forthright, humble. Never met another teacher who was so genuinely selfless."

A chef noted, "She was so much better than "Easy A" MacDumb. Now he's the retiring assistant director of education. Work that one out."

A coach whispered, "I often wished she'd stroke my ego and let me get on with my game. But that wasn't her way."

A doctor mused, "I remember the time she said I'd end up in the cemetery if I didn't learn that there's more to life than a snort and a quart. But there's more to teaching than putting students down."

A professor chuckled, "I expected her to rise up out of the coffin and

say, ‘Scot, argue with me like you would if I were your mother, a sister, or a rival. Put more passion, evidence, and reasoning into your comments!’”

vi

A caretaker mumbled, “She was just an old teacher, I guess. She must have worked too much and lived too long. And earned too little from the looks of that coffin.”