

Eric Seiley

Burning Bridges As We Go

25 October 2022*

*Revised Nov2023

5, 238 Words

Lessons to Live By

Brian bit his lip hard enough to break through the skin and start blood dribbling down his chin.

Professor McGill - Steve to his friends - handed Brian a box of Kleenex from his desk before continuing to read aloud from Brian's latest English term paper. *"You can't always get what you want? Take the long way home? Isn't it ironic? I'm a loser, baby, so why don't you kill me? I'm sorry, Mr. Severs, but what kind of essay are you writing? I don't understand the context surrounding these sentences?"*

"They're lyrics, Professor. From songs."

"Ahh, I see now. Then my next question is why are you writing clichéd platitudes expressed in song lyrics as your personal essay?"

"I was trying to connect those song lyrics to my life experiences. Explain sorta like who I am versus how the world sees me, you know? It was supposed to sound kinda pithy or something."

"Really? You were trying to be forcefully expressive? Or possibly a fruit with too much pith?"

"Umm, well..."

“Yes, well, it was a valiant effort, but a bit confusing to the reader. Especially us old teachers who aren’t up on the current music trends. And you didn’t include a thesis sentence. Why don’t you take another pass at it and write your personal essay in your own words, Mr. Severs. I find them far more interesting and a better way to communicate your experiences. But first google personal essays, write an outline, and make a quick Tik Tok about the significant event you’ve chosen to write about. I’ll give you credit for all three. Then write your essay using clear, solid sentences and email it to me by Friday. At least five hundred words please.”

“Thanks, Professor McGill.”

“Alright Brian. See you Friday. Keep up the good work.”

For Steve, freshman English classes at the University of Maryland had long ago become an exercise in suspending disbelief sufficient to accept how few students had any competence in the principles of writing. Sure, most had heard of punctuation and could even spell a few words correctly when they weren’t shortening them into initials, “btw.” And some students could occasionally re-produce a proper introductory thesis statement, but Steve suspected that had more to do with Microsoft’s writing database than any particular student’s prior ability to properly format an essay.

“Most of these kids are fucking morons, if you ask me,” growled Professor Talabani – Sue to her friends – at their weekly departmental meeting. “They can scroll google on their damn iPhone like a pro surfer hitting the pipeline but don’t know the difference between expository, descriptive, or persuasive writing to save their ass. And where the fuck were all their high school English teachers? Off browsing Snapchat trolling for their next underage date? You’d think they’d at least teach them the word literally actually means *precisely verbatim* and not some substitute euphemism, for fuck’s sake! Am I alone here in this?!”

Over the last two decades, ever since the internet turned into the *World Wide Web* really, nearly every professor noticed fewer and fewer freshman arrived to college prepared or even aware of how to wrestle their loosely tangential thoughts into a disciplined, cohesive narrative analysis. Ironically most new students loved creative writing and believed they could be the next David Foster Wallace on their way to writing *Infinite Jest*. Without realizing, of course, how their adjective heavy, overly emotive pieces were both painful to read and incredibly boring.

Steve knew it would be easy to blame public education, but he didn't. Not the private school system nor charter schools either. Because every teacher from middle school to high school to college knew with each successive generation of social media obsessed young students, who viewed discipline as abuse and constructive criticism as bigotry, they were slowly becoming more and more desensitized to the printed word. Even more discouraging, most of his first semester students thought passing grades were obligations colleges were mandated to give out because the student, or really their parents, had paid "good money" for them to attend. And those fees guaranteed not only good grades, but a degree at the end of four years spent "finding" themselves. As though colleges had become societal *Rumspringa's* rather than bastions of higher education.

"It's not just a millennial issue either, you know," lamented Susan, "These parents are just as delusional as their bastard offspring!"

Steve did believe it was a millennial problem at first – an entitled laziness on the part of the student. But he soon discovered, like Susan, that parental guidance was the real issue discovering most parents not only echoed but originated the same sentiment their children did – about college, life, education, you name it. Money and not the pursuit of knowledge, they believed, guaranteed success to a better life. Whether earned or not.

Deserved or not. And a college degree the expensed report required to obtain admission.

“If I didn’t think they’d try to strip me of my tenure,” Susan continued, “I’d fucking make a point to tell each and every fat ass parent who drives up in their piece of shit, pretentious Tesla or Prius or Humvee or the fuck whatever being driven nowadays when they drop off their idiot offspring, to log out of their social media accounts, shut the fuck up for once, and read a book written by a classic author. They might find purpose and meaning they didn’t know existed.”

Steve agreed in principle, and he certainly had his own opinions on the matter, but rather than pointlessly complain about the state of education during their weekly faculty meetings, he decided to change his teaching style and see if he couldn’t raise his students’ expectations. Instead of insisting freshman learn the “old fashioned way” through lecture, study, and testing, he decided to put the whole semester in their hands and ask how they wanted to learn. He discovered most students, except for the especially lazy or academically sheltered, responded well to the changes.

Here's how he set it up. On the first day of class, when nearly all registered freshman were sure to show up, Steve eschewed the traditional rollcall. Instead, he held his hand up high like he was asking a question, introduced himself quickly, then pointed to a blue file cabinet along the north wall of the room.

“The syllabus,” Steve explained, “along with all course requirements including every question and every answer, is in the top drawer of that blue file cabinet. Any student can access the file during class time whenever they like and peruse the material at their leisure. If you want an A, then everything you need is in that file cabinet under the class heading, ‘McGill’s English 1A.’ If you submit all your assignments, complete every test, and attend the final you will receive an A for this course.”

Here Steve always paused to give each student a chance to process what was being explained.

“To be clear,” he continued, “You don’t need to come to class unless you want to. And everything you need to learn over the course of the semester regarding the principles of English composition is in that file cabinet for you to have, in totem, today. There is a workbook with a chapter test to be completed. And you are required to write five essays: Personal, Argumentative, Expository, Descriptive, and Narrative. You can do the work over the course of the semester, one piece at a time, or all in the first week if you choose to. You can turn in assignments one at a time or all together if you prefer. Everyone who completes the workbook and writes five essays, returning them here to me at any point during the semester, will receive an A.”

Some students were starting to catch on. Others still looked unsure.

“You should know, I will not grade your work. You’re A is assured if you simply complete the assignments and turn them in. However, if you would like me to review any essay or workbook assignment with you and make recommendations, I am happy to do so. My goal is for you to determine how you want to learn and at what speed suits you.”

Another pause. Most students getting it and beginning to buzz like bees in a hive with the expectation of an easy A and additional free time.

Once their surprised comprehension sunk in deeper, Steve continued, “I will be in this classroom every week on the scheduled Monday, Wednesday, and Friday during the times noted for this class, as well as office hours after, for those of you who would like additional instruction. Attendance will not be taken, nor mandated, for any class except one - on the day of the Final. Familiarize yourselves with that date. All students must present themselves here at that prescribed final date and time as mandatory to pass this

class. Other than that, your time is your own to invest in whatever way you deem best to acquire the knowledge needed to pass this course.”

Steve always took this moment to look out at the student faces wondering who would stay, who would leave, and which student would, at some point, become a problem. There was always one though he was never quite sure which. Many students were predictable at this age, but there were always a few surprises in the bunch.

“Let me say in conclusion,” Steve finished, “For those who wish to improve their knowledge and skills in English composition, it would be my honor to provide the instruction needed to challenge yourselves. For those who just wish a rudimentary A, then make your way over to the blue file cabinet, remove a syllabus, a workbook and any additional, appropriate materials named. I look forward to collaborating with each and every one of you over the course of the semester. Thank you. Class dismissed.”

Five minutes start to finish.

After a few semesters, Steve knew the lazy students simply because they had the biggest smiles on their face when they jumped up to rush over to the blue file cabinet. The average and the uninterested students, fearful and hesitant at first, usually followed suit till each group had collected what they needed and left.

The few students who stayed behind were generally split between two types: one, the more academically obedient, who felt confused as to what to do when granted free will for the first time in their young academic lives. And two, the few genuine, education interested students who wanted to learn and improve their writing skills. The latter being, by far, the most rewarding group to teach.

And so each semester generally went until the Final. The lazy, average, and apathetic student doing whatever - usually showing up during the last week trying to turn everything in at the last minute just before the final. The dogmatic academic showing

up every week expecting lecture, quizzes, and tests. And the genuine student who remained excited to earn well written victory after victory through hard work, trial and error, and as much inspiration and teaching skill Steve could bring to the task at hand. He always hoped one of his students would one day write their own *Infinite Jest* though he knew most wouldn't. Still as long as they tried, he was happy.

On the week after Finals, before his winter break began, Steve usually received one or two calls from the helicopter parents whose children had either failed because they forgot to attend the final or received a grade lower than the desired A because of incomplete work turned in. It boggled the mind, but it happened.

This most recent parent call was courtesy of a freshman named Bridget - one of the most uninspired students Steve had thankfully not had to deal with since her first day. Come the final day, Bridget had shown up late to class, with barely fifteen minutes left, having not turned in a single essay or her completed any portion of her workbook. Something even Roy, the densest university All-Star football player on scholarship had managed to pull off by simply copying answers provided by his tutor and writing five sincere, if not particularly skillful, essays. While Steve spoke with other students, collecting their assignments and asking what had worked for them and what could be improved, Bridget perched haughtily nearby in the front row seat using the time to file her nails all the while side-glancing Steve's way and sigh-moaning to make sure he understood *she* was the one being put out. Not him. *Her*. It was a spectacularly entitled performance and quite possibly the most insulting Steve had yet witnessed in all his years. Apathy, to Steve, being the most cardinal sin in academia. And entitled laziness the most disrespectful to professors who loved teaching.

When her turn came, when she was the last still in the classroom, Bridget let Steve approach her. Then she explained, "Look, Prof, I'm, like, totally legacy and totally like an Omega Nu this year, but I still have to totally, like, follow the pledge rules and be on

call and stuff like that to my sisters. So like I was pretty, totally busy all semester. I mean like Sister Kiki - she's not really a sister in the catholic nun way or anything - but a total Sorority sister who literally keeps us busy like 25 hours a day. Well, she was all, you guys have to decorate for the Alpha Betas this week for their big homecoming event. And me and the other pledges were literally super busy and didn't even get to sleep or anything. So, I just didn't get the chance to turn in any assignments. I did them, I just have been like totally busy with my Omega Nu responsibilities. That's like why I didn't even get to the final on time because, like, I literally had to drop a night to the Alpha Betas and couldn't say no. You understand, Riiiiigghhheettt?"

"You still have till the end of this day. Do you have any assignments or essays to turn in?"

"Like I just explained I did them, I promise. And I'll get them to you as soon as I can, but like Sister Kiki is expecting me and the other pledges to be at the event tonight. So I have to go now, but I'll get them to you. Riiiiigghhheettt?"

Of course, humans being human, such things invariably happened and the student tended to make promises they had no intention of fulfilling. Especially when their experience with adults had been adults rarely enforced any accountability in the face of juvenile protest. Steve recorded Bridget's final grade as an F and sent the official email notification, including the required addendum she could revisit the decision within a week's time before grades were forwarded to the college administration.

Steve wasn't surprised Bridget had turned out to be this semester's problem student. But he was taken off guard when she presented herself to his office early Monday after the weekend looking a bit disheveled, at least as far as a sorority girls were likely to be. Wearing a thick Omega Nu sweatshirt over jeans, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, signaled her "serious study" affectation.

“Like here,” she spat dropping a stack of crumbled essay papers and the class workbook on his desk.

Curious, Steve started looking through the workbook and essays written. Halfway through reading, he realized the handwriting in the workbook was crudely masculine. Not at all the curves and hearts you might expect. And the essays struck him as very similar in unskilled quality to another student - Roy, the All-American football player on scholarship.

Ahh, Steven imagined. She had Roy complete her work. “This is your work, Miss Ashbury?”

“Like totally yes, of course.”

The funny part was cheating with all the answers available seemed ludicrous to Steve. But, instead of being contrite, Bridget had resorted to rationalizing and using one the oldest trick in the books – having the boyfriend or girlfriend do the work.

“Like, it’s really important to my mom and dad, you know,” she said, “I can’t like get an F when I am supposed to get an A. Which is kinda what you promised everyone on the first day of class. That’s like *literally* what you told us. Plus, I already told my parents I was getting A’s in all my classes. So here’s your papers. I did it. So you have to give me the A like you said. If you don’t, then I’ll tell my parents you like totally cheated me.”

How was this kind of disconnect possible? Steven wondered. Well, maybe it wasn’t too difficult to guess.

When students came to his office to complain, Steve knew from experience they would fall into one of two categories: the first category tried to use coercion involving the “oldest” profession. The student, in as smooth a manner their experience would allow,

offered sexual favors - sometimes full liaisons - in exchange for grade improvement. Most just blatantly offered to “blow” him right there in the office.

Lord, this generation is so quick and uninhibited sexually, Steve always thought. Without any shame. Like they were simply offering you a piece of gum from the store.

Interestingly, over the last few years, more than a few male students had begun defaulting to this tactic in greater exponentially over their female counterparts. But Steve always, with the most gentle and non-judgmental grace he could afford, turned them down and excused himself. After being rejected, some students threatened to “expose” him even if they had to make up false accusations. It never worked because Steve was careful to show them the open office door, the secretary sitting outside, and the video and audio recordings he used with every student meeting for just these sorts of occasions. If that didn’t work, though mostly it did, he knew the chancellor had his back. And to help the student save face, he would offer them extra credit opportunities by which they could improve their grade. Most were only too glad to accept.

The other student tactic involved the threat of lawsuit, which often came from the more affluent students like Bridget who were raised to see staff and educators as their personal servants assigned to fulfill their least demand. The greater the affluence, the worse their outlook, the more the demand. And the stronger the opposition. Affluent students were seldom dissuaded by preventative video or audio or extra credit. They wanted something for nothing. And even the university chancellor couldn’t protect Steve for long when these students enlisted their parents for help.

“I’d like to do more for you, Steve. I really would,” Chancellor Denbrough – Charlie to his friends - commiserated during one such time. They were throwing back a few at McSorley’s and Charlie had become a bit inebriated. “You know how it is. The richer the parent, the greater access they have to all those power sycophants, politicians, and

lawyers who can pressure the university with threats designed to intimidate, even for minor or imagined offenses. To a hammer, everything looks like a nail. And to these parents, they damn sure only want acquiescence when it pertains to their child. I have enough problems with the board over the budget. Student affairs just gives me a headache.”

“Don’t worry about it, Charlie. I appreciate all you do. And I’m a big boy. I still have a few options to explore.”

“Thanks, Steve. You’re a good man. And I, sadly, am a shadow of my former professor self. Ever since they promoted me all I am is a hospitality clerk with a big title.” To which Charlie laughed ruefully.

Steve wasn’t without sympathy for the unfortunate position Charlie was prone to be put in. Rather than directing a college and helping it to grow into some great academic pantheon, he spent his time cow toying to disgruntled professors, insipid board members, and aggressive parents. All during a cultural revolution not seen since, well, the last cultural revolution of the 1960’s changed the entire college landscape across the United States.

Steve did have other options. On those rare cases when he suffered the crass indignation of parent or child too extreme, or when he felt most offended by their insipid threats, Steve kept one defensive strategy in reserve to right the balance of karmic education.

“Let’s be realistic, Mister McGill,” Bridget’s mother, Abigail, condescended during her prearranged call on behalf of her daughter, “College is a time for our children to find themselves. To experience the world away from their parent’s and develop those long lasting friendships that will serve them well in the life ahead. It’s what we did when we went to college. It’s what they are supposed to do now that they have the opportunity.

This is what college should be. But when you fail to regard Bridget's important extracurricular activities and penalize her for taking part in them, it seems capricious. She wasn't in a position to refuse her sisters. Nor should she have to. I believe you put her in that unfair position and so I expect you to restore her grade to a justifiable A. You should know, Bridget explained all about your first day of class speech. I don't know what you're on about, but as far as I'm concerned, Bridget confirmed she did the work, yet you still failed to give her an A. She thinks you might have something against her. I assured her, of course, that was not the case, but she is a beautiful girl and I know how you professors are with impressionable young girls sometimes. I experienced my fair share of discrimination when I went to university."

"I assure you Ms. Ashbury, such is not the case."

"Well, I am glad to hear that. But it still doesn't correct the issue at hand or how capricious you have been."

Steve wondered if Bridget's mother might've looked up the word capricious in the dictionary before deciding how to best to work it into their conversation. Most parents, even the affluent ones, wanted professors to think they were intelligent, even when they weren't, and could become defensive if suggested otherwise.

In Steve's many years of experience, he found affluent parents tended to believe wealth was more synonymous with being educated by sheer benefit of their financial sufficiency. And being financially sufficient meant being right. And being right and financially sufficient meant they were smarter than everyone else less wealthy. Even professors, doctors, and clergyman, who worked diligently to acquire their doctorate, were only thought of as a slightly elevated class of blue-collar worker and not in the same league as those with generational money.

Steve understood, like many of his colleagues, that just about any person could be smart without being educated, but only the discipline of education made a person educated.

“Ms. Ashbury, your daughter, Bridget, is, umm, an ‘energetic’ girl who could have easily received an A had she even remotely applied herself to the course dictum provided on the first day of class. I understand your concern, but I do not believe it would be fair to the other students in the class, namely those who did the work and completed the final, to have Bridget’s grade elevated above theirs when she did not earn the higher grade. It would also be unethical considering Bridget simply did not earn a grade higher than F. But it is only one class. With a little extra work over winter break, Bridget can complete all assignments and receive an A. I trust you understand.”

“Oh, I do, Mister McGill. I do. But I am not sure you do. Bridget needs to receive an A for her required classes now so she can maintain her eligibility to be an Omega Nu. An F jeopardizes that. Nor do I want her burdened with unfair requirements, especially since she completed the work required, and needs to move forward. She will be focusing on other, more important matters for the remaining year. I am sure you understand. If not, I would, unfortunately, be required to engage my husband’s lawyers and have them contact the chancellor directly. That would certainly not look favorable on you. But, we don’t have to let it come to that, do we?”

“I understand, Ms. Ashbury.”

“Do you?”

“I do. I will rectify the issue immediately.”

“I am glad to hear you say that. Thank you for being reasonable. That will be all, Mister McGill.”

Steve noticed she ended the call not with “professor” but “mister” and hung up on him like he was the butler.

Steve did as he promised. He elevated Bridget’s grade to an A knowing it wouldn’t make any difference to her education nor his ethical integrity. Such issues, he had long ago reconciled, would never become “the hill you die on” as his mother used to intone. She had been a college professor herself who taught Steve a few tricks along the way. Like never openly exposing yourself or getting into a power struggle when other means were available.

After elevating Bridget’s grade, Steve put a call in to one of his “other means available.”

“West End Bar and Grill,” Joey shouted into the phone so he could be heard over the clinking of beer steins, the jukebox music, and the rowdy laughter coming from his patrons.

“Hey Joey, its Steve.”

“Steve-O. Where you been, buddy? Missed you at the card game last month.”

“Sorry, academic life. A new semester started, and I picked up a couple of new freshman classes to my teaching load. Speaking of loads, is Bobbie around?”

Joey didn’t stop laughing even after he set the phone receiver down to go get Bobbie.

Bobbie, aka Bernadette. Aka, Joey’s wife, and Steve’s one time high school girlfriend. If you could call a few dates, and the beginning of a lifetime friendship, girlfriend. More like twin sister linked for life. Bobbie, as far as Steve was concerned, was the toughest, sweetest, most humble, most maternal women he had ever known. She had taken a liking to him from the first day they met, cared for him, given him his first kiss, kept him safe from all his school bullies, and taught him how to navigate the “rough” streets of their blue-collar factory town. She also encouraged his “book smarts” and wouldn’t

let him quit school after his parents died unexpectedly in a car crash his sophomore year and he tried to drop out. Instead, at her insistence, Bobbie's family took him in, even though it stretched their meager financial means, and treated him like one of their own. He would do anything for them. Since that day forever.

And her for him.

"Steve?"

"Hi, Bobbie."

"Hi, Sugar, what's up? You doing okay?"

"I am. Cindy and I are planning on attending your mom's 75th birthday next week. Let me know what we can bring. Otherwise, I'm just gonna show up with condoms and flowers and flirt my ass off with her all night long."

"Sure, sugar. She'd love that. You know her. We'd love to see you, too. But that's not why you called. Cindy and I already spoke about the party yesterday, so I know you got something else on your mind."

"No, of course not. You're right. I do. I was hoping to enlist a complete surrender."

"Oh yeah? It's been a hot minute since you asked for one of those. This one must be really rich, and a really big bitch."

"Well, she ain't Mother Theresa that's for sure."

"She got a name?"

"Bridget Louise Ashbury, 19. Bastion House on Faber Ave where the Omega Nu's live."

"Omega Nu's, huh. I knew a few of those self-righteous little sluts back in the day. Think their shit don't stink. Okay, Sugar, I'll pass it along to Joey's crew. Talk soon. Say hi to Cathy."

“Will do. Hey, tell Joey I won’t skip his next poker night. I might need a down payment on a new car or something.”

“Funny man. Bye Sugar.”

After the semester ended and winter break officially began for him, Steve sat down to his morning coffee and his beloved Washington Post newspaper. On this particular morning, the picture of Bridget being arrested, in the seen and heard around town section, caught his attention first. He read the full article enjoying every paragraph - about how a well-known politician had to bail out his Omega Nu college freshman daughter after she was charged with criminal breaking and entering into a local dentist’s office. Drugs were suspected to be the primary motive.

Two local boys, who had witnessed the break in, claimed the girl had picked them up at a nearby west end bar because she wanted to “party” and knew where she could “get some good blow.” They didn’t know what she was planning till she drove them down the street, parked her Mercedes in front of the dental office, and used a hammer she retrieved from the trunk of her car to smash the front office door.

“Wait here,” she told them before crossing over into the closed dentist office. One of the local boys left to call the police because he thought she was “crazy” and didn’t want to get blamed for the burglary, being he was on probation and all.

The other stuck around and just shrugged as if to say who could figure what crazy rich chicks did for entertainment.

The case seemed solid. Your classic “open and shut case.” The responding officers arrived while the alarm was still sounding to discover the front glass door shattered and the Senator’s daughter passed out on the lobby floor inside the dentist office with the

hammer in one hand and two sealed packages of dental cocaine powder, worth around \$25,000 each in her other.

Of course her family connections, Steve knew, would ensure she would only get probation as punishment and a stay in rehab rather than jail time. Which was pretty standard for rich socialites when they pled guilty. And, naturally, she would be expelled from the University of Maryland.

Interestingly, at the scene of the crime, the article reported, after being woken up and arrested, the 19 year old Senator's daughter could be heard yelling, "But, I didn't do anything! I don't even remember how I got here. It's not right. I didn't break into, like, any dentist office. And I don't own, like, any hammer. Look at me! Like I would even touch some dirty hammer from some dirty carpenter or whatever. Like literally look at my nails. You think I did this? If you don't let me go, you're gonna be in big trouble! Do you know who my father is?! I'm gonna call my dad and he's gonna have you all fired."

She was partially telling the truth. At least about her culpability with the burglary.

Steve smiled and poured himself another cup of coffee before moving on to the book review section of the paper. He was satisfied, after reading the article, Bridget wouldn't be returning to school any time soon, if ever. No matter, he would be returning though. Steve liked teaching students new lessons to live by.

The End.