

GUEST LECTURER sponsored by the University
Honors Program

“My Miseducation”

Thursday, January 26

@4:30 PM

LA 205

Featuring

GUEST LECTURER

Craig Lancaster

Author of *600 Hours of Edward*, *The Summer of Son*,
and *The Art of Departure* among other books



To start, I want you to thank you all for coming out for this. I truly appreciate it. And I would like to thank David Craig and the MSUB Honors Department for inviting me here to put this capstone on the extraordinary opportunity of teaching a fiction class this past fall. I'm so grateful to have had it.

What I'm doing here today has been billed as a public lecture, but I'm not really the lecturing type, unless it's about how to best use your timeouts in an NBA game, and in those cases I usually just shout at TVs. Instead, this little ditty is far more likely to be any one—or perhaps all—of these things:

A public comedy routine.

A public gnashing of teeth.

A public acknowledgment of ignorance.

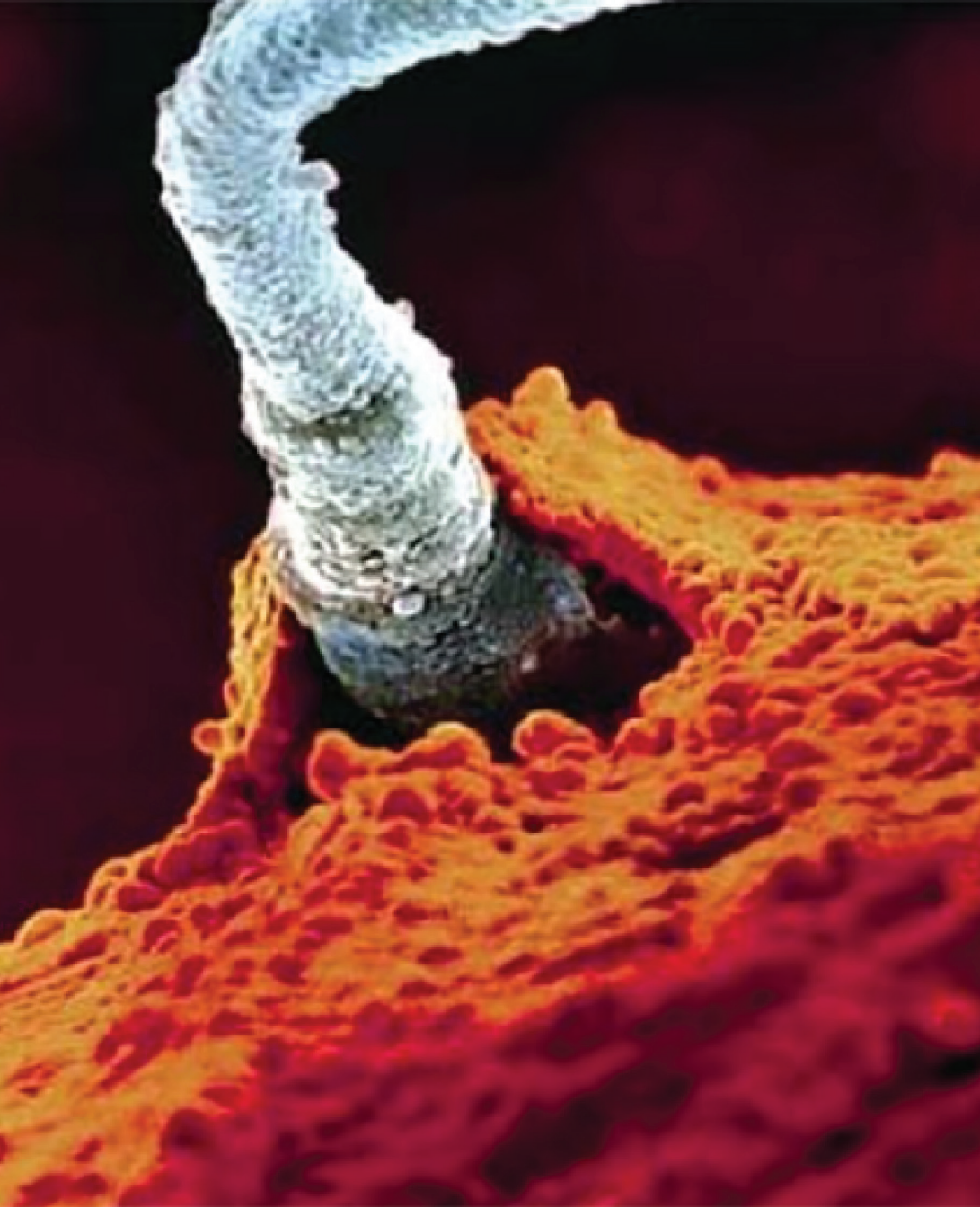
A public plea for help.

What I hope it will be, most of all, is a public celebration of public education—the great notion of our civilization, if you ask me—and a consideration of how we might tie that to citizenship, our most pressing problem as a civilization (again, if you ask me).

What I'm going to say here is informed by three things: First, my own formal, futile experience as

a student, all those years ago. Second, time spent in the presence of my many teacher friends who've been kind enough to share their space and their thoughts. And, finally, this past semester teaching here at MSUB, which if nothing else taught me two important lessons: First, teachers work incredibly hard, something I knew but didn't fully appreciate until I tried to build a sustainable 15-week syllabus. Second, those of us outside your realm don't appreciate you near enough for those efforts. I thought I did. I was wrong. Because here's what has changed: I'm no longer talking and thinking about “hey, you're a teacher, thanks for that.” I'm talking and thinking about “hey, you're a teacher; how can I help?”

Now, to get at the first of these three legs, we're going to have to take a trip together, nearly thirty years back, to a time of paisleys and hair product and glorious acne ...



No, that's a little too far.

No ...



Come on, man ...





Ah, yes, here's the fellow I'm thinking of.

So ... this is me, Craig Lancaster, around Thanksgiving 1987. I was three months from my eighteenth birthday and six and a half months from my high school graduation (top 10 percent of my class, with honors, baby!).

I was also perhaps the kid in North Richland Hills, Texas, who was surest of his glide path toward a brilliant future. By the time I brooded for this picture in front of the family fireplace, I had my excellent ACT score in hand, I'd won a national essay contest, and I was balancing an impressive stack of letters from college recruiters. Still in my future: academic medals in two state journalism competitions

(yeah, I was that kid), a designation as the Texas State High School Journalist of the Year and a fourth-place finish in the national competition. I'm telling you, despite the refusal to smile here and the questionable fashion choices, the only thing between me and world domination was getting Lisa Fravert to love me as much as I thought I loved her.

By late winter, I would be fixated on my college choice: Hanover College in Hanover, Indiana, a small Presbyterian school that had made me feel wanted from the drop.

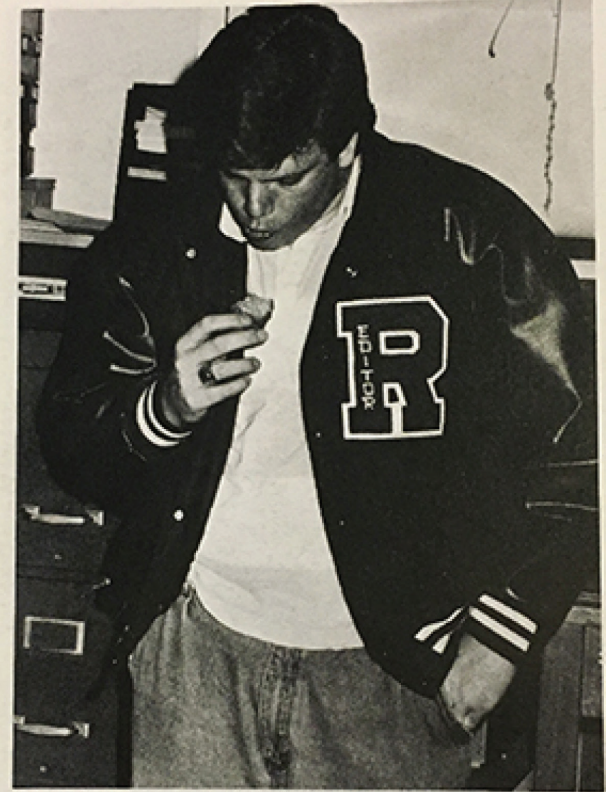
By early summer, I would be enrolled somewhere else.

By the following December, I would be back living at home, waiting to enroll at Tarrant County Junior College, a sad college dropout with a subterranean GPA.

Oh, and Lisa Fravert would be totally into some other guy.

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telling you what happened is easy: On the advice of one of my high school teachers in particular, and spurred on by the financial fears of my parents, I turned down Hanover, the college I wanted to attend, and enrolled at the University of Texas at Arlington, a commuter school thirteen miles from home. To be fair to UTA, it had—has—one of the finest student newspapers in the country, and my star seemed pointed in the direction of a journalism career. It was also far cheaper than Hanover would be; the \$3,000-a-year scholarship I'd won from the Fort Worth Star-Telegram would cover the necessities, and my work on the school paper would give me some walking-around



Previewing the latest issue of the *Reveille*, Craig Lancaster (12) enjoyed it and his lunch. Craig was the editor of the newspaper and was named 1988 Texas Association of Journalism Educators High School Journalist of the Year. Photo by Chris Mullins.

money. That teacher and my parents made perfectly sensible arguments: Craig, you want to be a journalist, and UTA is a great training ground. There are three major metropolitan newspapers in the Dallas/Fort Worth area that will be rife with internships and part-time jobs. And, look, the financial aid paperwork says we'll have to sell off your sister and brother to cover the gaps at Hanover.

The one argument they didn't make—and, more important, the only argument I didn't make on my own behalf—was the biggest of all: I didn't want to go to UTA. I wanted Hanover. I wanted the countryside and a small student body and pep rallies and a chance to figure out who the hell I was, far away from suburban Fort Worth, Texas. For months, the people at Hanover



The University of Texas at Arlington

Architectural style: mid-century penitentiary

had made me feel like I was one of them, and I think the admissions officer and I were equally devastated when I called and said I wasn't coming. He scared up some extra aid, and he suggested there would be more if I just got myself in the door. No dice. UTA, where admission was as transactional as getting a car wash at Mobil, was the more prudent, pragmatic

choice, my advisers said. Nobody can say they were wrong. Except me. I can say it. They were wrong.

Now ...

I bear some responsibility here. I was legally an adult, and I think had I stood up for myself in the way I wanted to, my parents would have swallowed hard and trusted me and co-signed the student loans that would have made Hanover possible. I didn't stand up for me, and nobody made me trudge off to UTA at the

point of a gun, so what happened on that campus—debilitating depression, non-attendance, utter failure—is in large part my responsibility. I accept it. I've long since cauterized that wound and fulfilled some of my potential. (I'm not dead yet, so I'm also not done.) Harder to deal with, I think, is the emotional residue.

There's the irretrievable time-and-place stuff, for starters. I'll never again be eighteen years old, feeling as though I'm coming into my own and in my time, joyous about the chance to move away from home and start my life on my terms. That's important stuff, and it's the stuff of regrets. Without knowing how things would have otherwise gone at Hanover, I can only mourn that part in any concrete way. The age has eluded me. The rest is a matter of conjecture, and I've moved on from it.



Also difficult was the temporary collateral damage to people around me and my relationships with them. I have one memory in particular of coming home post-dropout, after a shift of delivering pizzas, and finding my mother on the couch, thumbing through my portfolio for Texas High School Journalist of the Year. All these perfectly presented

letters of recommendation, all these proclamations of certitude that the Craig Lancaster my patrons knew was such a bright young man, such an achiever, such an inspiration.

“I’m just wondering how all of these people could have been so wrong,” Mom said that night.

It’s horrifying to hear that, even now, so let me say, for the record, that it was a complete outlier from my mother, whose currencies are love and support. It was

an awful time, for all of us. I'd flamed out in way that neither I nor my family expected, and nobody had much idea how to put everything back together. She was hurt, I was hurt, and we were flailing out against each other most of the time.

That difficult season, and the miscues that led up to it, has affected me in real, ongoing ways. I have no patience for being told what I can't or ought not do. I don't think it takes an active imagination to see how such defiant disdain has brought me to interesting frontiers and deep personal angst in equal measures. If I'm going to be wrong, I'm going to be wrong. I'm not going to be somebody else's idea of wrong.

That's the error in what my mother said to me, and I told her so in some terribly unkind words. But that doesn't mean she was entirely incorrect. The way things stood that night in December 1988, people had been wrong about me, at least in their anticipation of how my

immediate future looked.

Turning all that around was what I decided, for purposes of this address today, I would call My Miseducation.

Before we go further, let me flesh out the picture a bit by moving on from that scene my mother would probably prefer I hadn't shared with you. In the spring of 1989, I took a couple of classes at Tarrant County Junior College. By the fall, I was back at UTA. Then I was out again. Then I was back. And, finally, in the summer of 1991, I dropped out for good, when I was offered the kind of full-time newspaper job that was pretty much the point of my academic efforts.

It was like the line from the Ben Folds song: three sad semesters. Anyone want to guess how many credit hours I completed toward my bachelor's degree?

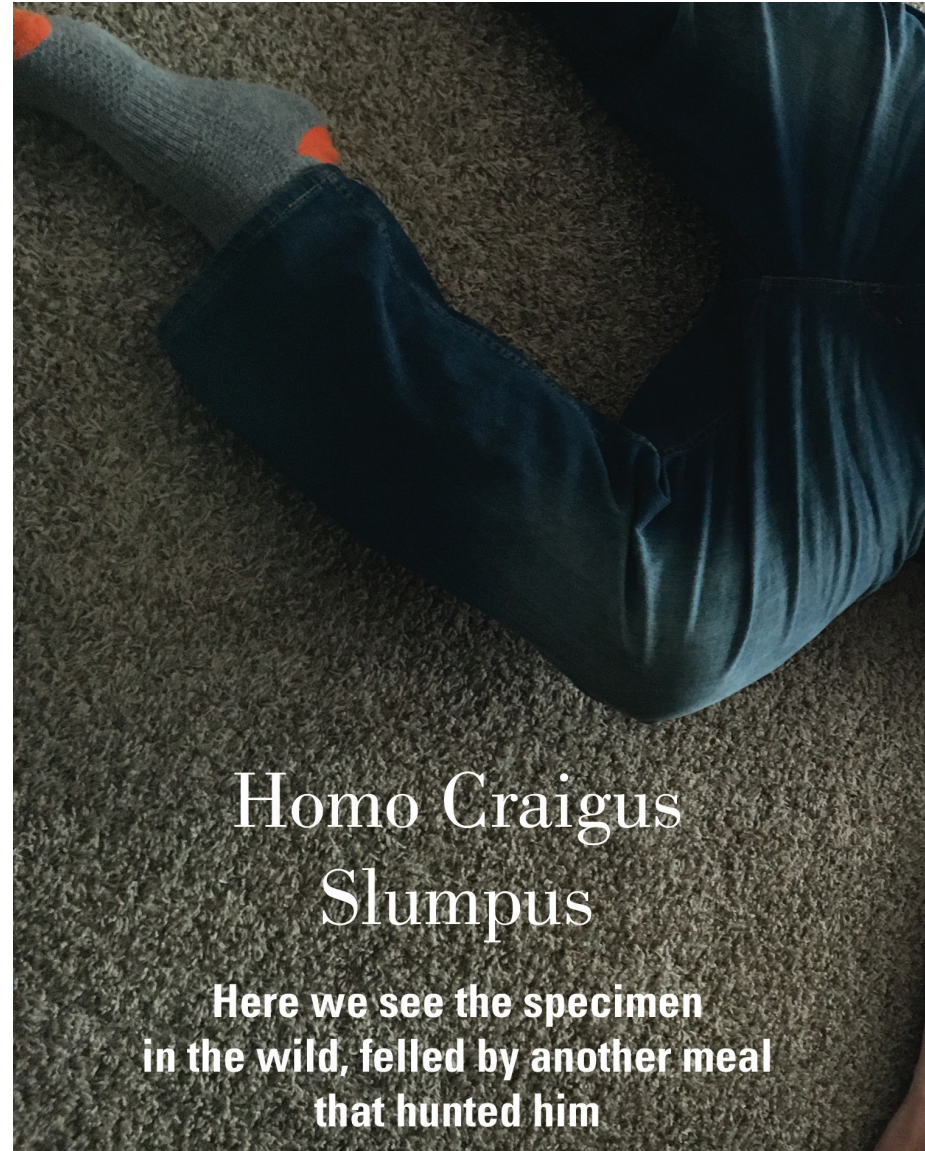
Seven. Three years, three tries, countless dropped and failed classes, seven credit hours. One newswriting course, one English course, and a unit of phys ed. That's the whole enchilada, as they say. And that's why I would cackle every time one of my students this past fall called me "Professor." Because, yeah, seven credit hours. That remains the total, by the way. Seven. Jesus Christ. All I can do is laugh.



So let's save time and acknowledge here that between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, I was an exceptionally poor student. But give me my due: I was an excellent learner.

Let's go back for a second to that December night in my parents' living room. (I'll call my mom later and apologize.) Even as she said that horrible thing to me, I was making my pivot to something else, something better. The month before, I'd answered an ad in the Star-Telegram seeking correspondents for weekly community sections of the newspaper. I was eighteen, and the hiring editor wasn't much interested in me until he read my clips (the very clips my mother held that awful night). He gave me a job: the lowest-level, worst-paying, crappiest-assignment kind of writing job there was, but a job. Our deal was that I'd keep plugging away at school, he'd feed me a story opportunity every week or so, pay me \$50 per, and let me build up a body of work. By late December, just days, really, after my mother openly wondered how so many people could be so wrong about me, I had a story on the front page of the main newspaper. I was 18 years old, and I'd climbed a mountaintop of sorts. I wasn't in the place I'd wanted to be, and I hadn't made much headway into my half of the bargain with my boss, but I was getting somewhere.

So many somewheres, as it turned out.



Homo Craigus Slumpus

**Here we see the specimen
in the wild, felled by another meal
that hunted him**



Autodidact (noun): a self-taught person.

Pedant (noun): a person who is excessively concerned with minor details and rules or with displaying his learning.

Ostentatious (adj.): characterized by vulgar or pretentious display; designed to impress or attract notice.

I've had some number of years to observe myself in my natural habitat, and here's what I think: my best assets, and greatest liabilities, are an autodidactic nature and a personal attitude that in my younger years came off as brash and in my middle age probably just marks me as an asshole.

It's not intentional, if that helps.

To put it in the common vernacular, I like to learn

stuff, and I like to start my education by figuring out what I can discover just by noodling around and digging into things. When I reach the end there, I start spreading outward, looking for smart people who can help me learn more. The best friend I've made in Billings, Bob Kimpton, is a guy who knows a lot about a lot, most of it in fields I haven't even dabbled in. I tempt him with Mexican food just so I can hear him hold forth.

This tendency served me well even when formal education and I couldn't make our peace with each other. In the career realm, I became an award-winning page designer because I decided to, immersing myself in theory and practice and imitation. I became a copy editor and then a department head at one of the best newspapers in America because I decided to find the nexus between the elements of style and structure that came so naturally to me and the underlying grammatical unification. I hung out with stylists and linguists because it was fun, and because I had much to learn from them.

And later I wrote a novel, and then six more, because I decided I wanted to do it. It was just as simple as that, and just as difficult.

Every step of the way, I had teachers and mentors, and in a way that defied gradebooks I received an

education. One that continues today.

In my newspaper career, which spanned the ages of eighteen to forty-three, I worked for 10 newspapers in seven states. At those stops, I've been threatened by mayors and coaches; felt 40-below in Nome, Alaska; been in the stadium to see Brett Favre have one of his greatest nights while in the depths of his worst grief; shot the bull at Pebble Beach with Craig T. Nelson; run interference for Donna de Varona when she was being harassed by an overly amorous dog musher; written more memos than I ever dreamed possible; hired and fired; and then, on my very best day, granted myself release on my own recognizance from the job because I'd lost the faith.

Yeah, I never made it to Hanover College. But would I alter the journey to change that?

No way. Not on your life.

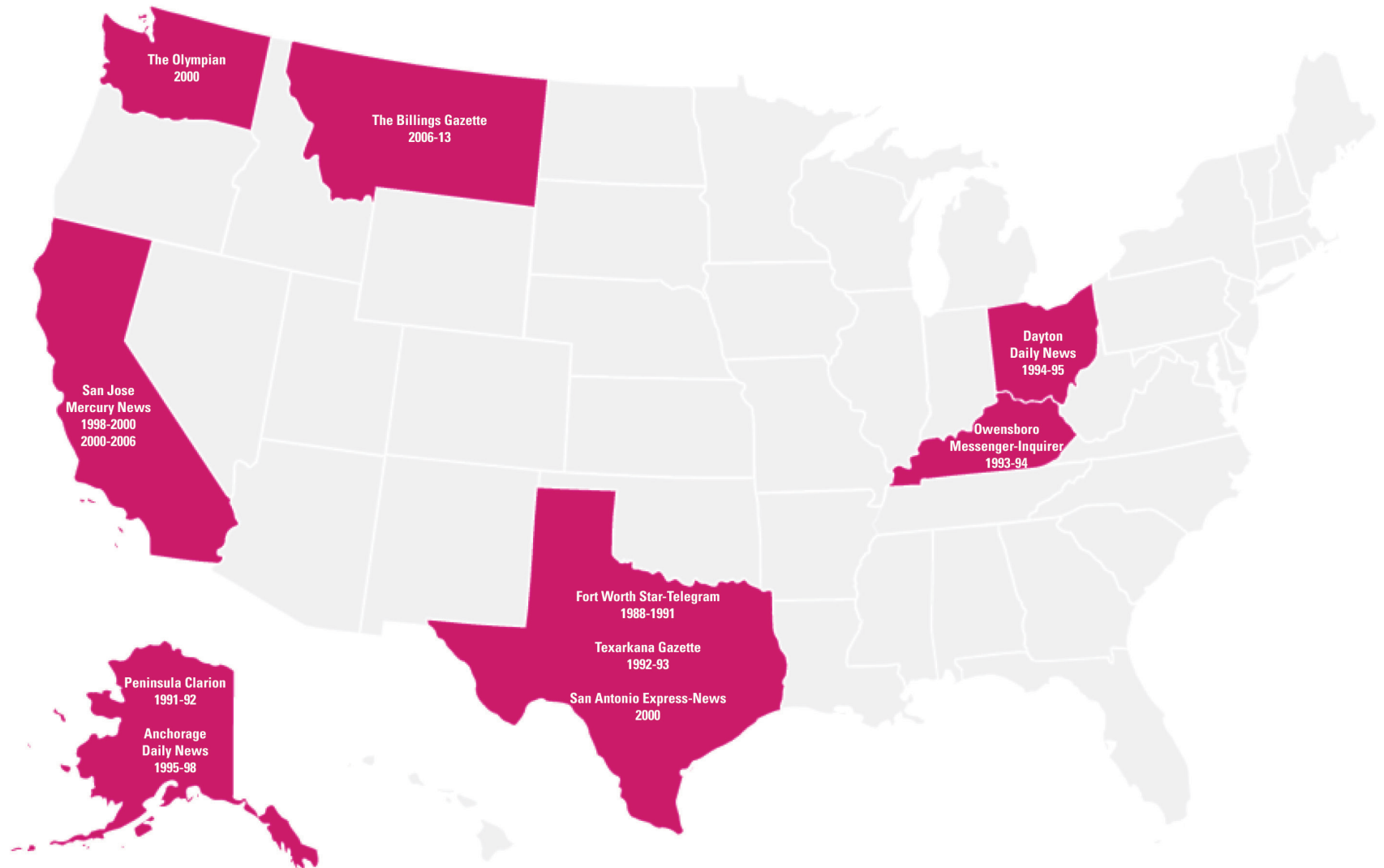


This past October, I opened up my Facebook page and asked teachers to tell me what they wanted their community to know about their jobs.

It may be the single best thread I've ever initiated. Here are some of the responses that have stuck with me.

My reactions to these responses, then and now,

Journalism: What a long, strange trip it was



“I have to mention the plight of the adjunct who, if you calculate the number of hours they clock both in and out of the classroom (lesson prep, grading, conferencing, etc.), make less than minimum wage and have no insurance, retirement plan, or job security. Universities cram adjuncts into windowless offices, discourage or refuse to support their research or career development, and hire them for lower level courses because they’re ‘cost-effective.’ They’re some of the hardest-working, smartest, most dedicated faculty I know, and they deserve way better treatment.”

“There are too many people who think teaching is a part time job. It goes way beyond student contact time.”

“Every day I leave work so incredibly physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. But every morning, once I get that first cup of coffee in me and start to look over what math we are going to adventure into and explore that day, and think of the students I will get to know more about and make meaningful connections to during that time, I am reminded why I do this, and why I love it so much. Every kid needs and deserves a champion and an advocate.”

“Teachers are not the enemy. For 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, 40 weeks a year, we labor to instruct, guide, advise, parent, support, and prepare children to take on the world. Whenever someone asks me if I want kids I remind them that I have, on average, 1,850 of them. We care deeply about our students and, more often than not, we desire desperately to work with parents in helping our students succeed. But we are all too often met with crushing apathy or flat-out resistance when we reach out for help from home.”

“In all my years as a college professor I never met a teacher who didn’t earnestly believe in what they were teaching and want their students to learn.”

“All I want to do is teach in the way that I know is developmentally appropriate for kids. That is all my colleagues want, too. Keep politics out of the decision-making process. Keep the tests that give us information on what to teach and how kids have grown, and get rid of all the extra (expletive deleted) standardized tests that give us no information whatsoever to drive our instruction. Bring back the arts and social studies and give us STEAM, not just STEM.”

“I think people need to know how functionally illiterate most college students are...and how unsurprising it is, given how teachers at lower levels lack any sort of empowerment or incentive or respect.”

“How deeply I loved each and every student that came into my classroom. Even the ostensibly unloveable ones, I worked until I could love them, until I could see their unique and spectacular gifts. I want people to know how the system is designed to use that love against you, pencil after pencil, lost planning period after lost planning period. I burned out so fast, and I wish there had been a system interested in retaining me.”

are all over the place. Depending on how you look at it, things are ceaselessly grim or ceaselessly optimistic despite the darkness. The people we put on the front lines of public education try to honor the square pegs in an educational world made up of round holes. And they're doing it against unbelievable odds. Kids who aren't near ready for the material. Kids who don't get enough to eat. Kids who wear sweatshirts on 5-below days because that's all they've got. Three hundred homeless kids at Senior High alone. That's a shameful number right there. Every time I get mad about what our new president is tweeting at Alec Baldwin, I ought to imagine that number and get mad in proper perspective.

How do we help?

If you're here and you're not a teacher, consider that question.

If you're here and you are a teacher, consider the possible answers.



f Charles Bukowski was right and the problem with the world is that the intelligent people are full of doubts while the stupid ones are full of confidence, well, I'm grateful for the intelligence.

Public education is a national treasure. It's also

terribly beaten down, and the wolves are at the door.

How to fix it, whether to fix it, stasis vs. change—you could get a dozen really smart people together and not move an inch toward meaningful change, because you'd have a dozen different ideas of where to go. I'm certainly not going to muddy the waters by dumping out a lot of theory after my expansive experience of teaching one college honors class.

Instead, I'll dump out my worries. My doubt.

Every scrap of data suggests that education—formal or no—is the most reliable means of moving across economic classes. Public education is how we do this en masse. But there are powerful interests aligned squarely against public education. How do we fight them? More important, how do we win that fight?

I wonder what we'd be, as a nation, if we declared access to health care and education as basic human rights and conducted ourselves accordingly.

I wonder what might happen if we considered three things—medicine, schooling, and corrections—incompatible with profit-and-loss statements.

I worry that we're going to drop the ball on early intervention and nurturing—where we don't reach that kid who doesn't have support at home, hasn't been read to, whose sense of wonder hasn't been stoked. I worry for those kids and who'll they'll be later.

I worry for how long we'll last in an orgy of social and educational Darwinism.

I wonder what would happen if we asked more kids what they want.

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o close this out, let's bring it back around to this kid.

When I look at this kid now, I think of all his built-in advantages: a solid home, a nuclear family, a safe neighborhood. I think about how he never wanted for sustenance or love, how he was encouraged to read and learn, encouraged to open his mind, encouraged to take people as he found them and to live in empathy and generosity. And this kid—partly through his parents' tunnel vision and fear and partly because of his own failures—still got chewed up by higher education. Fortunately, he was privileged enough in his family and community to find another way through the doors he wanted to open.

I don't hold any sorrow for this kid, nor should you. But I wish somebody had asked him, at a crucial moment, the question I suggested not more than a minute ago.

Craig, what do you want?

If asked by those who guided my decision, maybe I would have told them. They saw college for me as some

sort of job training ground. That's not exactly a radical notion, but it didn't align with what I anticipated from my coming college years. I wanted an adventure, a community, a place where I could set my rampant curiosity free. I figured the job training would be baked into the overall experience. And, as it turned out, my tendency to seek out knowledge on my own terms eventually delivered the jobs even without the degree. Hanover College would have posed no barrier to my becoming a journalist or a novelist or anything else I might have wanted to pursue.

And education has to be about something more than jobs, doesn't it? Technology is going to eliminate or fundamentally remake most of the ones we have now anyway.

I'm much more interested in how we can help people learn to think, to synthesize information (which is in abundance) and bring it to some kind of clarity (which is in deficit). We've just seen a major demonstration of what happens when raw, or even patently false, information gets dropped into the community conversation and folks are unable or unwilling to assess it on its merits.

It's only going to get worse until we get better.

Now, on the cusp of forty-seven years old, I find that my primary interest in education lies in its ability



to make us better citizens. Because, dammit, we need to be better citizens, every single one of us. We need to be informed and engaged and working toward our common interests. We need to hold bad actors in the public realm to account. We need to be able to lift up ourselves and help lift up others. I nod vigorously when Elisa, my wife, a teacher for a decade, tells about the great satisfaction of helping students learn to solve problems. She was a collegiate-level writing teacher, but making her students better writers wasn't always her highest aim. Sometimes, the best she could offer them were more tools for navigating their ever-changing world.

I'm serious about my question: how can I help? My friends working in the public schools, many of whom are with us today, know they can call me up any time and ask me to visit their classrooms and try to light a fuse. It's a solemn trust with me, a way to pay back all I've been privileged to receive. I consider it part of my taxes.

I gladly pay. I'll gladly pay more.

I hope we all will.

Thank you.

Special thanks to ...

- Elisa Lorello, Brittany Alberson, Judith Mohr, Pamela Tarango, Mark Miller, Kate Berry, Ainsley Goodrich, and Julie Hippler for sharing their teaching experiences.
- Montana State University Billings, David Craig, and Tami Haaland for the wonderful opportunity to teach a fiction course there. I was so blessed to be able to do it, especially considering my own spotty history in the classroom.
- The folks who came out to hear this talk when it was originally delivered. I was nervous. I hope it wasn't obvious.
- To my dear friend from high school, Lisa Wilson (nee Fravert), for being such a good sport.
- And to my parents—Leslie and Charles Clines and Ron Lancaster—who've been wonderful sources of support all my life.