

Diving Well

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The ten-meter diving platform at Independence High School's Frank Fiscalini International Swim Center is a monument from another epoch, an age of optimism when students and teachers were still encouraged to dream. A concrete edifice resembling a fire-fighting training tower, it stands mostly locked today, its ground floor now a storage closet for pool gear. Guarding the tower is a heavy steel door opened only for the random swimming and diving meet, or on that rare occasion when some PE coach figures "What the hell," and risks his career to offer the kids a memory.

It must have been on such a day almost twenty years ago that I overheard the students in my Language Arts 3 class speaking with unguarded delight about something. It wasn't the kind of thing that usually delighted them – not a fight, or a pregnancy, or a classmate who had shown up high to class – but instead something to do with school. They were talking about how much fun they'd had jumping off of the ten-meter platform.

"You see that one fool do that flip?"

"You see my jump? Dude, that shit was *tight!*"

I should explain here that I was a pretty bad teacher at the time, and that these were, in my view, pretty bad students. They had long before figured out that they were the school's losers, embracing the role with a defiant pride that could easily destroy the chirpy idealism of a young teacher like me. I was only a few years removed from a university teaching program, once eager to convert the natives to the wonder of the written word, yet they had already succeeded in eroding my idealism into the infamous cynicism of the teacher lunchroom. It was with these students in mind that I had crafted my despairing maxim that teaching was the act of trying to liberate those who were content with incarceration.

So I had settled into a grim non-aggression pact with the students of Language Arts 3. Don't worry, I assured them: you stop using the F-word as a comma, and I won't expect any substantive thinking from you. Don't let me hear your soul-crushing tales of gangsta glory, and I'll give you the busy work that you seem to crave. Most importantly, when we read (a torment for all of us that I will strive to avoid) we'll avoid anything of substance and focus strictly on comprehension. Deal? Deal.

But this strange sound of their enthusiasm for a school event somehow awakened a dormant sense of possibility that I had taught myself to avoid. Suddenly I found myself saying to them, "I feel an assignment coming on."

"What?"

"We all jump off the ten-meter platform, and then write about the experience."

This was as great a leap as I had ever allowed myself with these students, and I half-hoped that they would decline. But for them, anything was better than another hour of English.

"Aw, hell yeah!"

I began to have second thoughts. "You're going to have to write about the experience, though."

This did not discourage them. "All right, we can do that!"

We negotiated the terms of the deal: students who jumped would write a first-person account of the adventure, while those who opted not to jump could write in the third-person. Oh, and as a combination bonus and incentive, I would jump too. First. Perhaps this explains why, as I made arrangements with the PE office later that afternoon, a

line from a Talking Heads song ran continuously through my head: "My God, what have I done?"

A week later, as I began ascending the tower for my promised leap, I saw that there are actually three platforms: one at three meters, another at five, and the highest at ten. Upon reaching the three-meter platform, I looked out over the diving well and realized that this was already higher than any springboard I had ever been on. The pool lay spread out broadly before me, placid and beckoning. Wouldn't this be good enough? No – the deal was ten meters, not three, and my students, joined now by a class from boys' PE, waited expectantly on the deck. I would have to continue my ascent.

At five meters, the pool seemed to have shrunk considerably. I felt the first touch of fear as the turquoise surface began to resemble less an open field and more a small back yard. My legs quivering as I continued upward, I began to understand that this hadn't been such a good idea.

At last I arrived at the ten-meter platform, a hideously small rooftop with a ledge that fronted a massive void. It felt like being on the roof of a high-rise, of some place I was not authorized to visit. Thirty-two feet

below me, the water of the diving well had shrunk to a frighteningly small size. A haunting, audible breeze drifted around me while, holding my hands outward for balance, I took a few tentative steps forward, looking down toward the water, and then retreating, slowly and carefully, back toward the stairway.

I realized that I hadn't properly prepared for this moment, that I had no real notion of the guts it took to jump from this height. But now that I was here, standing at the top of the diving tower, the hangars of the Moffett Field Naval Station clearly visible some fifteen miles distant, I knew that I had no choice.

Sensing my fear, the class of swimmers from boys' PE decided to help, gleefully encouraging me with a chorus of male adolescent invective.

"Jump, you fucking pussy!"

"You're gonna die, asshole! Ha-ha-ha!"

What a way to go: plunging to my death for no other reason than to escape the humiliation of that teenage scorn. Egged on by the catcalls, I walked back toward the ledge, stared straight ahead, and took several resolute steps until I simply walked off the tower.

Plummeting toward the water, dimly aware of the roar of the crowd, I stiffened my body into the pencil-straight shape that would protect me, but began listing to the left. Attempting to right myself, I began desperately to wave my right hand in a circular motion.

I was still waving when I hit the water.

I had been in the air for less than two seconds; I spent much more time below the surface, sounding the depths. It turns out that the diving well is eighteen feet deep because you need most of it, a fact that became evident as I swam toward the surface, which seemed to retreat with each stroke of my arms. "Where's the surface?" I began to ask myself. *"Where's the fucking surface?"*

I broke through at last and took a deep, grateful gulp of air. I was alive. The boys on the deck, who moments ago had been viciously questioning my manhood, now broke into a round of sardonic applause. Then I remembered my own students. Where had they gone? I didn't see any of them in the crowd on the deck. Then some of the boys began pointing to the concrete grandstands on the other side of the pool, where my students sat on one of the rows, each of them holding up a hastily written, homemade scorecard:

0.2, 1.1, -3.7, -1...

Now that's funny, I thought, swimming back. Wickedly, cleverly funny. It takes real wit to craft and organize that kind of group smack-talk on the fly. Had I been underestimating these students? Back on the deck, my legs still shaking, I dried myself as I watched the fearless boys and girls of Language Arts 3 hurtle themselves off the platform in gleeful, death-defying twists, flips, and contortions.

Years later, I would read "Diving In," an essay by Mina Shaughnessy, the composition scholar who, instead of dismissing her students as I had, strove to understand the reasoning behind their errors. In "Diving In," she argues that the greatest barrier we writing teachers face is ignorance of our students: "It is no longer within our power, as it once was," she declared, "to refuse to accept them into the community of the educable." Indeed, that is what I had been doing; by seeing my students as deficient thinkers, incapable of independent critical insight, I had confused their language, world-view, and interests – all of which I disapproved of – with their ability to think, denying their entry into this community.

Those Russian-judge scores would stand as the highlight of the assignment. Their written submissions were

forgettable. But there was something in those scores, some promise that I had not recognized before. They had tipped their hand, showing themselves to be natural critical thinkers, and I had been deeply wrong to dismiss them. They didn't need me to teach them how to think; they needed me to provide opportunities to stimulate that ability which they already carried in them – and all I had to do was jump off a three-story building to realize it.