

What's in a Name? **By Kayla Costenoble**

It helps if you remember your own name and the names of family and close friends. Unfortunately, in this inevitable aging process so many of us are going through, names of so many around us get lost in the ever-increasing memory fog. But it seems to me—and this may very well be a justification designed to make me feel better—that remembering faces, facts, and incidents that had meaning is more important.

Right now, I'm remembering back to 1949—a very long time ago—to teachers whom I, hopefully, will always remember for their lasting influence on me. But I can't remember any of their names.

I was a naïve freshman from a small town in New Jersey at a huge Syracuse University. He was a young English instructor stuck with a small class of mostly would-be football giants, and me. (An aside: I can remember my beginning elementary teacher husband's horror as he listened to a group of teachers at the end of a school year assigning the worst kids to the newest teachers).

It quickly became apparent that those huge hunks of potential football stars were not interested in being part of the class; they were just required to be there, so he and I became a class of two. I don't know how it happened or how he got away with it, but this was no ordinary first-year college 101 English class. It became a creative writing experience I now look back on as extraordinary. One memory stands out. The assignment was to write about an Abner Dean cartoon that was in our equally extraordinary text book. There was no caption on the cartoon. It showed a tree, and a skier approaching it, with one ski going around the left side of the tree and the other ski going around the right side of the tree. I have no recollection of what I wrote, just remember loving every minute of it. I met with this teacher several times during my freshman year and he gave me good advice on how to succeed in college. Which I did.

(Another aside: I googled Abner Dean while I was writing this.. He was an award-winning cartoonist who died in 1982 at the age of 72. In his New York Times obit I read, "His drawings portrayed the hopelessness of modern life, depicting its minor frustrations, nightmares, bafflements and wishful thinking." Then I wondered how he got into my Syracuse University freshman English book. He was the nephew of renown modern sculptor Jacob Epstein, who was, when I was at Syracuse, its sculptor-in-residence. So maybe there's a tenuous connection there.)

I've taken courses at several other universities since those long-gone undergraduate days, but I've never found teachers as challenging and stimulating as mine at Syracuse, even though it frustrates me that their names continue to elude me. One tall, imposing spinster spouted Shakespeare as if it were her native language,

making his plays come alive, mesmerizing, and something to be cherished and remembered (hopefully) forever. I can still picture her, standing straight and declaring “Out, damn’d spot! Out, I say!”

In an amazing eye-opening semester and introduction to Chaucer, the professor-without-a-name was a little round gnome of a man who looked and spoke like a character from Chaucer’s world. “Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote” was an unusual welcome to spring as it rolled off his tongue. This naïve New Jersey girl was, at first, shocked at what went on in some of Chaucer’s bawdy stories. My Chaucer impersonator also introduced me to something I had never experienced before. He distributed the ubiquitous soft blue essay books (how I loved them!) for the final exam, then left the room until the exam was over. There was no cheating. And then there was the time one of my brilliant professors spent an entire semester on just one of William Faulkner’s short Yoknapatawpha County stories.

Those were the days, my friend
We thought they’d never end
We’d sing and dance forever and a day
We’d live the life we choose
We’d fight and never lose
For we were young and sure to have our way...