

# A sprig of verbena and the gifts of a great teacher

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<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/13/AR2010041303683.html?hpid=opinionsbox1>

One of President Obama's consistent education themes has been the wish that every child cross paths with that one teacher who hits the light switch <<http://archives.starbulletin.com/2007/07/29/news/story04.html>> and changes one's life.

Each time he expresses some iteration of that thought, I suspect thousands or millions think briefly of the person who held that distinction in their life. The light master. Or, in my case, the one who extended an imaginary sprig of verbena and, holding it to his nose, inhaled deeply in a gesture of solidarity with William Faulkner.

That scene took place in my 11th-grade English class, oh, a few years ago. The teacher was mine for only three months, but he changed my life in a flicker of light. I thought of him Monday when -- if you'll grant me this small indulgence -- I was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for commentary <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/12/AR2010041202071.html>> .

On such occasions, one is expected to recognize those who have helped along the way. But also on such occasions, one is likely to be a bit distracted and unable to remember one's own name, much less those that deserve mention. I would like to correct the record with one who stands out and who, as it happens, is celebrating his 50th year of teaching.

I materialized in James Gasque's class in March of the school year for reasons that will have to wait for another day. Suffice to say, I knew no one and had come from a small high school in central Florida where, for some reason, no one had bothered to teach the diagramming of sentences.

Thus, my fellow students at Dreher High School in Columbia, S.C., were way ahead of me when Mr. Gasque finally called on me to identify some part of a sentence he had written on the blackboard. His back to the class with chalk in hand, he stood poised to write my instructions.

Every living soul knows the feeling of helplessness when a crowd of peers awaits the answer you do not know. Whatever I said was utterly ridiculous, I suppose, because my classmates erupted in peals of laughter.

I have not forgotten that moment, or the next, during all these years. As I was trying to figure out how to hurl myself under my desk, Mr. Gasque tossed me a sugarcoated, tangerine-colored lifesaver from the good ship lollipop.

He whirled. No perfectly executed pirouette can top the spin executed by Mr. Gasque that day. Suddenly facing the class, he flushed crimson and his voice trembled with rage.

"Don't. You. Ever. Laugh. At her. Again." he said. "She can out-write every one of you any day of the week."

It is not possible to describe my gratitude. Time suspended and I dangled languorously from a fluff of cloud while my colleagues drowned in stunned silence. I dangle even now, like those silly participles I eventually got to know. Probably no one but me remembers Mr. Gasque's act of paternal chivalry, but I basked in those words and in the thought that what he said might be true. I started that day to try to write as well as he said I could. I am still trying.

Mr. Gasque's even greater gifts belong to all who ever sat in his class. That sprig of verbena, a recurring symbol in "The Unvanquished," stays in my mind because it also symbolizes the great passion Mr. Gasque brought to teaching and to the literature he loved.

During my 12 weeks or so in his class, we devoured "The Unvanquished" and John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men." I remember every word and sensation.

"I've always wanted to lean down from my back stoop and pluck a sprig of verbena," he said, inhaling deeply. Exhaling and tilting his head back, he closed his eyes and seemed to drift off into some lemony-scented world where verbena is the smell of courage. I closed my eyes and followed him.

A couple of decades later, having moved back to South Carolina, I went looking for Mr. Gasque, toting a pot of verbena. He didn't remember me, but upon hearing my tale, he asked that I speak to his class. Afterward, his cheeks streaked with tears, he presented me with two lined pieces of notebook paper -- my essay on "The Unvanquished."

Obama is right about the power of teachers. Thank you, Mr. Gasque.