

Dreaming of a New Semester

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I realized why professors have anxiety dreams at the start of the academic year: teaching is really hard to do. If you're doing it in classes of fifteen and forty students, as I am, you're teaching in a setting where the students will find out not only what you think about x and y but also what you are like in some strange and intimate way. They'll get a sense of how thoroughly you prepare, of course, but, even more, they'll see how you respond to the unexpected—to the savvy young woman who wants to know whether you're using the term "postcolonial" in a cultural or economic sense, to the curious junior who wonders aloud why Don DeLillo gave the name Simeon Biggs to a snappish African American character in *Underworld*. For such moments, you simply can't prepare—except by accumulating years upon years of teaching experience and weathering night upon night of anxiety dreams.

Because on that first day of class, truly anything can happen: your students aren't going to love you just because your last three semesters went well, and it's a fair bet that none of your undergraduates (and almost none of your graduate students) will have come back from the summer freshly impressed by how deftly you handled that ludicrously unfair book review in the June issue of *Crank Quarterly*. Amazingly, none of your students will arrive on the first day having heard anything you've said to other students over the past twenty years; amazingly, you'll have to make a first impression all over again, for the twenty-first time.

If it's a course you've never taught before, you may wind up rewriting or scrapping the syllabus in midstream; if it's a course in a fairly new area of study, you'll have no idea what kind of knowledge base to expect from your students. And, of course, if the window ledges are seven feet high in Zzyzzych 304, how will anyone be able to close the windows when the motorcycle gangs roar by?

Buddhists speak of learning to see the world with "beginner's mind," and that's precisely what you have to do every semester: begin again, from scratch, knowing that anything can happen—seeing those ten, or fifty, or even five hundred students, like the two thousand students you've seen before, with beginner's mind. Our anxiety dreams, surely, are the index of our secret fears of failure and inadequacy. But they are also the measure of how very difficult it is—and how very exhilarating—to begin each semester with beginner's mind.

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