

Dear Mr. Wilson

[OR A JOURNEY FROM THE FAMILIAR TO THE STRANGE]

BY DAVID MARCUS

Dear Wallace Wilson:

It's fifth period on September 8, 2003, a Monday. I should be heading back to work at a newspaper or magazine, interviewing people and tapping out the opening paragraphs of an article. Instead, I'm standing against the chalkboard of a first-floor classroom, facing 12 silent high school juniors who sit at four heavy wooden tables arranged in a square. I'm their English teacher, and I will be for 150 days of classes. Not that I'm counting...

Editor's note: Journalist David L. Marcus taught at Deerfield and advised the *Scroll* as the 2003–2004 Wilson Fellow. Marcus also finished writing a nonfiction book about a group of struggling teenagers sent to a therapeutic program in western Massachusetts. After keeping a journal of his time on campus, he used passages of it in a letter to Wallace Wilson '47, who created the fellowship.



MY GAZE DRIFTS TO AN EDWARD Hopper poster on the far wall and then out tall windows with a view of the old brick church on Main Street. I tell the juniors that we're going to delve into Hawthorne, Fitzgerald, Hemingway and other greats of American literature; we're going to study vocabulary and etymology. I don't tell them that I've just spent the past month on a crash reading program, catching up on works I haven't read since I was in high school in the '70s. I'm taking attendance—*Barkus, Chung, Conway, Hwang*—but I'm thinking, *Nine months in this classroom? In two decades as a reporter, I've never spent nine consecutive months in the same place. When I was younger, I hitchhiked on 18-wheel rigs to write a*

story about a trucker's strike. In more recent years, I hopped from covering car bombs in Colombia to war in Angola.

The dozen kids in Room 40, girls in fresh-pressed dresses and boys in blue blazers, look at me, hoping for inspiration. All I can provide right now is nervous blather. I say we're going to talk about faulty parallelism and subject-verb agreement. We'll work on declamations (whatever the heck those are). I'm thinking something else: My bike is right outside the door: if I sprint down the hallway and down the steps, I can make it to my car at the edge of campus. It's a straight shot to I-91, I'll be in New York in about four hours—just when everyone else is heading to sit-down dinner.

Fifth period ends before I can high-tail it. Somehow I muddle through two classes of seniors in my elective in magazine journalism. A tougher crowd, they own this school; they can sense a neophyte teacher the way a vulture senses carrion. The only saving touch is that I have a few post-grad students who are as green as I am to this place. One is Dom Uguccione, a football player who, like me, is a public school kid. If the seniors turn on me, maybe Dom, out of sympathy, will block them while I retreat.

Then, suddenly, it's 3:10. The classroom is still. I'm all alone with my books and my syllabus and Hopper's forlorn man in a diner. *One day down, One hundred forty-nine to go.*

At the orientation for new faculty, Dean of Faculty Rich Bonanno warned us about the “crazy hectic lifestyle.” I shrugged. I’d covered coups and earthquakes. How hard could it be to teach at a college prep school? I envisioned a year of swimming, hiking the Rock and perusing great books in the armchairs of the Caswell Library. Amid all this exercise and reflection, I’d have a chance to see if teaching was for me, or if journalism still beckoned.

From the start, teaching was more difficult than I’d imagined—especially when it came amid sit-down meals, dorm duty, weekend duty and meetings (plus, in my case, revising a 100,000-word book). Doing well at my suburban New York high school meant *not* doing certain things: not getting suspended, not beating up someone, not getting beat up. But Deerfield’s standards were higher than many colleges I’ve visited. The students stumped me with questions about comma splices and other arcane points. Everything about Deerfield was different, even the language. It took me weeks to figure out when APs were bad (accountability points) or good (advanced placement). The simplest things befuddled me. During brief teaching stints elsewhere, I got accustomed to giving letter grades. I tried to adjust to Deerfield’s number grades. What made one essay worthy of an 87 and another an 88? Darned if I knew.

How do you teach writing? I’ve probably written 4,000 articles in my life, but I had only a couple of teachers who could clearly explain grammar and the mechanics of writing. And I never had a teacher who could communicate the art of writing—voice, style, point of view. I observed several of Deerfield’s incredible teachers, but I couldn’t parrot

them. Then I had an epiphany during, of all things, a faculty meeting.

Philosophy teacher Michael O’Donnell brought in Amherst College professor Austin Sarat to give a guest lecture. A dynamic speaker, Sarat managed to weave strands of law, ethics, history, the media and campus politics in an hour-long discourse on teaching. I scribbled one of Sarat’s memorable lines—“I want to take my students on a journey from the familiar to the strange.” I’ve covered dozens of school board meetings in which elected officials and administrators prattled on about standardized testing rubrics and “performance-based metrics.” Not one of those people ever uttered something so insightful and succinct about the purpose of schools.

Ultimately, I decided to blend my own assignments with those from “real” faculty (teachers don’t plagiarize assignments, someone explained to me, they borrow). I asked the juniors to become 21st century Mark Twains, writing what would have happened if Huck Finn and Jim had floated down the Deerfield River. I asked my seniors to write detailed descriptions of landmarks they knew well—the dining hall, the Greer, the gym lobby—and then to go soak in the sights and write again. I made students revise, revise, revise, just as editors had done to me. I despised those editors at the time; now I thank them.

I tried to help students see what was strange and wonderful amid the every day, even among their 600 peers. One senior, Alex Cushman, wrote a beautiful story about a resident of his dorm whose father was killed in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie 15 years before, when the boy was just

one year old. Several of the kids who read Cushman’s article said they had no idea that the boy had lost his father (the boy cooperated with the article because he wanted others to know about the terrorist act). I tried to bring those same lessons to the *Scroll*, asking the editors to take a fresh look at everything around them. Karl Moats, a senior, wrote a story about Deerfield’s first Ethiopian student, Melaku Teka ’05,

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who came from a village that didn’t have electricity for days on end. Before arriving on campus, Melaku had never used the Internet. He was stunned when two roommates from Greenwich, CT, surfed the Web for a minute and came up with pictures and biographies of Ethiopian runners.

I, too, tried to look at the familiar in a new way. While researching a book about so-called “troubled teens,” I’d become cynical about the state of American adolescents. My worries eased in School Meetings, watching Anne Parker Hammond ’06 stir the audience as she played the fiddle. And hearing Muji Mashal ’07 from Afghanistan, talk about the Seeds of Peace program that brings together students from Israel and Arab countries and others in conflict. And seeing Lou and Jack Kinder, twin sister

and brother, put on roller skates and tutus for a hilarious skit to publicize the figure skating club (although the highlight might have been watching English teacher Peter Nilsson in *his tutu*). My worries eased as I stood on the quad with my young daughter and son, seeing Woody Travers '05 juggling flaming batons for the Deerfield students and the local kids from the Big Brothers and Big Sisters program who roam the campus every Friday evening.

I never had a chance to relax in the Caswell. Just when I was getting the hang of it—sit-down meals, *Scroll* layout, even grading—the end came. My last assignment for my juniors was to imagine that Lt. Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* is a Deerfield alumnus who returns to campus to give a speech. What does he say? The kids took to it quickly. “Love doesn’t last long, so take it like fine wine.” Julia Conway wrote. “Drink as much as you can and savor the taste.”

On the last day of classes, I asked my seniors to write about their most significant moment at Deerfield. Luke Patterson wrote about his first School Meeting at Deerfield—September 11, 2001. His parents were traveling out of the country and he couldn’t reach other relatives. “I was brimming with emotions and yet I had nobody to talk to,” he wrote. “I had never felt so alone.” Then English teacher Jamie Kapteyn '79 invited Luke to his family’s apartment. Luke wrote about the din of conversation that made him feel at home even as the tragic news unfolded. “I arrived at Deerfield while America was in a state of prosperity and I will graduate in a period of uncertainty,” he concluded.

Mr. Wilson, if I’m proud of anything, it’s my work with the postgradu-

ate students from public high schools. Maybe I could identify with them. One of those PGs was Dom Uguccione, the football player. Dom would be the first to admit that his writing was convoluted back in September. But he kept writing and rewriting, finding active verbs and pruning unnecessary clauses. When I gave the final assignment, Dom wrote about the day his Spanish class had done oral exams; they’d run out of time before Dom’s turn came. Teacher Cheri Karbon invited him to stop by her apartment in a dorm. Dom couldn’t get over that; it didn’t happen at Mohawk High. Still, not only did he take the oral exam at his teacher’s kitchen table, but he found himself babbling in Spanish about the book *Like Water for Chocolate*. When he finished, Ms. Karbon said he’d done better than anyone else. “It was at that moment I realized what truly set prep school apart from public school,” Dom wrote. “It wasn’t the jackets and ties or the number of kids who got into Harvard and Yale. It was the faculty. They are not simply teachers you see for an hour a day. They are also the students’ coaches, dorm residents and, more importantly, friends.”

As I considered the grade (85? 86? 87?), I paused and reflected: this was the same Dom whose run-on sentences and roughshod grammar I had mercilessly corrected a few months earlier. I decided then that I’d done my best.

This year has been humbling and fascinating. I realized that although I want to teach part time in the future, my first love is writing about education. My year at Deerfield made me better equipped to guide readers on that journey from the familiar to the strange.

*Sincerely,
Dave Marcus*



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In January, Houghton Mifflin will publish his book, What It Takes to Pull Me Through: Why Teenagers Get in Trouble and How Four Got Out. The book includes lessons he learned at Deerfield about how schools can make students feel more connected to each other and their community. He can be reached at Dave@DaveMarcus.com. For more information, see his website, www.DaveMarcus.com.