

I knew Bill Steirer for slightly more than decade and a half, and was colleagues with him for even less time than that, though he taught here for 30 years, and though I inherited one of his most popular courses, the History of South Carolina, when he retired in 2006. You'd have had to have known Bill, I guess, to fully appreciate his way—he was a Yankee, a Pennsylvanian, who, precisely so for one who reveled in giving it as good as you got it, was always on the lookout for a screaming sockdolager. He died in 2015. A couple of years before that, at the visitation of another departed colleague, Joe Arbena, Bill told me that he himself had waited too long to retire and probably too long to die, which might sound morbid except he *really* wanted the joke of the thing—he wanted to wind up on one of those warbling Steirerian cackles, whiningly resonant like a mating call or a weather siren or incoming artillery shell: *hee-hee-HEE! Woooo-wooo-WHOOO-WHOOO! What do you think of that! Hee-hee-HEEEE!* Only just then he was hooked up to a breathing tank and couldn't.

Bill looked like the former college football player he was—combatively squatty, alligator arms, a powerful, pulling-guard's gut and torso, and stumps for legs that reminded me of fishing-pier pilings. His quirks were as legendary as his classes. Bill had a chronic need to listen to the same music; while I don't think Santayana had quite this in mind when he said that those who can't remember the past are doomed to repeat it, Bill's fear of missing something in the first 50 loops of *The Carpenters: Greatest Hits* repetitiously condemned the rest of us, over and over again, to the great mistakes of the musical past. His office was an exploded academic volcano, the books slugged on his shelves and spilling off in heaping piles, or stacked up on the floor in hard and soft cover stalagmites that cast shadows across old tests and papers strewn on the carpet. It was the manifestation of a febrile mind always erupting. (The Provost toured "new" Hardin Hall after it opened in 2002. She was so appalled that she left him a note: *Bill, clean up this office!* I doubt he ever saw it.) His wardrobe, every single day for the six years I worked with him, was a pair of bare feet in sandals, a pair of shorts, a pair of visible scars on his surgically repaired knees, and a tee-shirt of any color or variety but usually graffitied in the magic-marker autographs of students he'd mentored in years past.

Bill taught differently: all discussion, all the time. For his course on the American Revolution, he'd assign students a historical personality—a farmer in Pennsylvania, a Tory merchant in Charleston, a patriot soldier under Washington, a slave in Virginia. The student came to class in character. The role-playing was designed to foster research, imagination and sensitivity to multiple perspectives. In his South Carolina course, students brought questions on the assigned reading to each class—always how and why questions. They they'd write them up on the board, and he's circle the ones (a subtle way of teaching how to ask good questions) to drive that day's discussion. Bill was awfully quick on his feet, a master of improvisation, and he was enlivened by good-natured conflict and debate of any kind, historical, political, or otherwise—wherever the good questions led, he'd go. Almost from the moment I stepped on campus he tried to get me to do the same thing.

"Pauaaaaul," he'd warble. "You should try *disCUSSSsHin*."

At the time I taught by lecture. I'd be terrible at anything else, I said. Every week, practically every time I saw him, the same conversation, *Carpenters*-like, usually prefaced by the same debate about UNC basketball—a program, he insisted, of miscreants. He was also after Rod

Andrew, like me a Carolina undergrad, who'd been his Master's student years before. Their own teaching conversation always got bogged down in Bill's harping on Rod's Marine Corps ways. Saluting was a *requirement* therefore not, as Rod insisted, a military courtesy. He wouldn't let go of that, either.

"Let me tell you something," Bill said to me once. "You want to know the best day I ever had?"

I always like listening to teachers and their light-bulb moments.

"I was teaching American Revolution. I assigned one student to be the farmer in western Pennsylvania. We're talking about the Stamp Act crisis and I called on him: *Well, what do think of that? And you know what he says, Paul?* He says: 'You know, I think the Revolution just passed me by. I've just been out here on my farm planting crops and making do and I've missed it all.' Can you believe that? *What do you think of that? bee-bee-HEE! Woooo-wooo-WHOOO-WHOOO!*"

The *that* was exactly what Bill was trying to teach. The Revolution wasn't all-consuming, the way we often think a glorious cause must have been. For some people, maybe most, life just went on. They missed it. In telling me about it, Bill's eyes flared and his hands, which were gripping the arms of a burgundy chair that's still in my office, turned lava-red. His farmer was still active in the memory all these years later.

"But Bill," I said, "how many times has that happened? That class got it, but what about the other classes? If it's such an important point you'd want to make sure to tell every class, wouldn't you?"

I wasn't thinking about the American Revolution when I said that. I was thinking of the Confederate Revolution. It might be well and good to leave students to figure out for themselves that the American Revolution just missed some people. But in a place and time where the War still lives, where the stakes are still very high, I couldn't run the risk of having anyone leaving class without hearing that slavery was the essential dynamic of the war, the one issue without which there wouldn't have been crisis or war.

So I said: "I don't think so, Bill. I'll stick with lecture."

Bill's other quirk was to purse his lips and snap his head toward the ceiling, blowing air skyward. *Pffffffffffffffttt*. "That's *B.S.* That's not why," he said. "You don't believe that, do you? (That was Bill's favorite phrase—*You don't really believe that, do you?*—and it was always the wind-up to the inevitable cackling.) Do you really think because you *told* them and they *heard* you *tell* them that they *know* it? *Telling* isn't *teaching*, Paul.

"It's because you want to have control. You just have to let go of the control."

The conversations always petered out on this same point. We kept having them anyway. Some people would say that's because Bill was a nag. Bill was persistent about teaching as an act of risk and imagination—an act of spontaneous creation—in which curiosity was the

creative catalyst, and knowing was gifted over time. So I prefer to say Bill was a fire-eater: a radical when it came to teaching questions, not answers.

At the time, I was just glad that someone, anyone, was willing to talk to me about teaching. No one ever had. And I am profoundly sorry to have never had the chance to thank Bill Steirer, Alumni Master Teacher, for that.