

Commentary

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An ideal summer job of teaching, learning

Let's keep Austin weird. Please. I'll tell you why.

I have been team-teaching a Telluride seminar at the University of Texas at Austin. We are exploring the stories people tell about war and violence. By stories, we mean every kind of human expression: diaries, mem-



oirs, histories, letters, novels, short stories, poems, songs, photographs, speeches, journalistic accounts, official reports, clinical sessions and di-

agnoses, movies, paintings, drawings, plays.

Imagine yourself in a room three hours a day for six weeks with 18 of the most intellectually gifted soon-to-be high school seniors in the world. They are all creative, hard-working and respectful. They think and talk and write and listen well. They are nearly tireless in investigating who we have been, are and will be as human beings. They are diverse in interests, cultural backgrounds, educational experiences and political and religious beliefs. They discuss ideas openly and honestly. And they do this because they want to.

Imagine teaching with a talented professor like Stacey Peebles of the Honors College at the University of Houston. Stacey was in the Plan II Honors Program and then got her Ph.D. in English at UT-Austin on the subject of how violence is portrayed in war novels and films. She understands the human condition and poses hard questions, big and small. She inspires all students in the seminar, including me. She is relaxed and friendly but quite serious about learning. She knows how to write and how to teach how to write. She knows that clear writing begins with clear thinking.

Stacey and I have been doing this with two dedicated University of Michigan students, Keary Engle and Lynn Eckert, acting as teaching assistants, fellow students and senior guides for the Telluriders. Then imagine having the resources of UT-Austin and of Austin itself at your disposal. Imagine having someone such as Jay Jorgensen of the Liberal Arts dean's office to solve all practical problems like a benevolent Harry Potter wizard.

Outside of seminar hours, imagine hearing Nobel Prize winner Steve Weinberg talk — almost think aloud — for an hour about our universe and multiverses, about string theory, about science and religion and the history of knowledge. Weinberg spent another hour answering questions and posing new ones, until his voice was hoarse. He spoke with respect for

the intelligence of the Telluride students.

Imagine hearing musician Ernie Duraña, music writer John Morthland and blues master Clifford Antone talk for two hours about the long history and many ethnic components of Texas music. Then imagine Carolyn Wonderland demonstrating the very next day where Lightning Hopkins and Townes van Zandt and Bob Dylan and Albert Collins are in her music and how she uses it to convey her own ideas about our society. Imagine having UT's remarkable humanist Douglass Parker guide you through violence in Homer and other ancient authors. And imagine hearing Statesman feature writer Brad Buchholz talk about writing stories about a World War II tail gunner and a reunion of Vietnam veterans who had not seen each other since a firefight in Vietnam left some dead and others severely wounded.

An experience like this is rare. For me, the only thing comparable was when the MacArthur Foundation in Chicago used to hold regular reunions. Then I remember having breakfast, by chance, with author Cormac McCarthy, whose new book is absolutely gripping and is Texan through and through. I then talked in the hallways with biologist Jared Diamond, who was just embarking on the study that produced his just-concluded three-part National Geographic special "Guns, Germs and Steel" about how and why societies differ in their most important traits and institutions.

Imagine, too, meeting once a week in UT's national cultural treasure, the Harry Ransom Center, and having on display every week new selections of original manuscripts, galley proofs, first or rare editions, drawings, paintings, musical scores, photographs of H.G. Wells, e.e. cummings, William Faulkner, Tim O'Brien, Bessie Smith, Homer, Euripides, Siegfried Sassoon, Ezra Pound, Walt Whitman, Joseph Conrad. Imagine being guided through Bill Broyles' collection of mesmerizing photographs of the horrific eastern front in World War II. These black and white images take you right to the heart of Broyles' provocative essay, "Why Men Love War," despite brutality and waste on an unimaginable scale.

If you have a vivid enough imagination, you will grasp why I feel now, in the last week of the Telluride seminar, like Lou Gehrig in Yankee Stadium on July 4, 1939.

Austin is weird all right. Weirdly rich in people and institutions dedicated to preserving our humanity and freely sharing their own deeply human passions with others.

Palaima teaches Classics at UT. For Telluride programs, see www.tellurideassociation.org.