

Chapter 4. Letter to Jix

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For Noel Heermance, who will know why.

It's not easy to write of Richard (Jix) Lloyd-Jones, who chaired our department nine of my first ten years here.¹ Not only was Jix a mysterious man, but, through many years as his colleague, we were in key ways opposites. His instinct was to step back, and sometimes up, as if to a precipice, survey the scene, and strive to grasp the whole of it. Mine was to find my footing within it and venture forays from there. When Jix spoke to our department, he prided himself on speaking without notes, and he practiced several mnemonic strategies to keep his words in order. I admired that and felt one should not be overprepared for informal and semiformal occasions. I relied less and less on notes for my classes, too, but I never made the effort to know, much less master, the mnemonic strategies Jix favored. Sometimes I suffered for it.

Beyond all that, we had two further things in common. Jix had damaged lungs and I asthma, so when he paused on a landing of our building, wheezing, I knew the feeling well. Inhalers kept mine at bay. Jix was less fortunate. He had worse than severe asthma always and stopped at every landing. Also, we were both closet poets.

When I appeared in Iowa suddenly, by desperate chance, as a possible replacement for his closest colleague and friend, Richard Braddock, it must have been disorienting, though I was blithely ignorant of it. For years those two had collaborated on, and eventually published, *Research in Written Composition*, brought out while I was in graduate school. They were way ahead of whatever game I had, and suddenly Braddock was gone, killed in a traffic accident while on sabbatical in Australia. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been invited to speak to the English department and be considered for a position within it. I came armed only with what I knew, which did not include their book and had nothing of research about it. But I could draw on my experience, such as it was, in April of 1975, most of a year after Nixon's resignation and just days before the fall of Saigon. I can imagine Jix listening to much I had to say that afternoon and thinking, "Just where does this guy think he's coming from?" Nevertheless he assented, and a couple of years later—he was chair by then—he assented as well—it may even have been his idea—to my taking over *The Iowa Review*.

I'd been given no assignment for my talk. But I knew the position at hand

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was to teach writing, so I described my experience as a teacher and writer. And I spoke at length of the writing course I took during my first year at Amherst College, which then was still an all-men's college and very much aware of being a customary next step—though it was hardly that for me—after Deerfield, Exeter, or Choate.

“List six principles by which you live,” we were asked our first day, and we all did, surprised though some of us were, that we could summon or even pretend to so many. The next day we learned that all but one of us had declared himself “an individualist.” Well, then, was the single fellow who hadn't thought of that our only original thinker? What does it mean to be an individual, anyway? Write an essay about that. It was clear right away that we could only speak for ourselves and that it would be a good idea to consider closely just what you thought a self, specifically your self, was.

So, later, do you believe in ghosts? Of course not, we chorused, each of us in a page or two of prose. Who do you think we are, superstitious fools? Then we received several reports of encounters with the supernatural: apparitions, hallucinations, presences, even ghosts. Well, do you believe in ghosts now? And we all bent to qualify our first position. The next step was to observe that most of us had changed our minds and to ask what it means to do that. What happens when you change your mind? How does that occur? Do you change all or just some of it?

But the assignments, the writing prompts, were considerably more cunning than I have suggested. Here are the first three:

1. A great American poet is quoted in a recent book as having denounced college teaching that “frisks Freshmen of their principles.” Think about the problem seriously for a time and then set down a list of a half dozen of your principles (one or two thoughtful sentences for each), and explain in a paragraph your interest in retaining them. (Note: keep a legible copy of your principles.)
2. When examined, this metaphor of “frisking” has its interest, has it not. Rightly or wrongly you are being taken into custody, accused perhaps, your principles are your weapons, you may or may not choose to produce them with a show of violence, they provide a defense, etc. Or you are at the racetrack and your wallet is picked. Consider for a moment your principles as weapons of self defense (and of aggression), and write a page telling why in a civilized community of laws and books you need to be able to defend yourself. Who is your enemy? With what does he threaten you?
3. Leaf through the college catalogue with your principles in mind. Find a course that looks as though it might have the

effect of despoiling you of a principle. Quote the principle involved and the course description; then write a page—it will be imaginative writing, of course—telling how you think this effect might be obtained. Short of avoiding the course, how would you go about defending yourself?

Not only did that course keep me off balance, it seemed always to strive for the ineffable and to demand we write of matters we had not considered. Note that parenthetical clause about imaginative writing; almost off-handedly, we were being asked to invent. Furthermore, the assignments reward close reading that few of us were capable of. Who, I wonder, and it certainly was not I, challenged right off that first metaphor, “frisk,” which came as you may know, from Robert Frost? I’m sure the few who did, were there any, were well rewarded by the instructor’s taking a close interest in what they said. And what to make, too, of the assumed adversarial relation? We may not have warred with our instructors, each one shepherding about twenty of us through these assignments, but we were soon on guard against their next probing question. Scholarship was beside the point. These were personal questions that challenged us to answer as ourselves. I doubt that plagiarism ever occurred to any of us. That course made me live for an entire school year as an earnest commentator on my own experience, that is, as a writer. It has had the most lasting influence on me of any course whatsoever.

We did not learn formal structures of argument, or even of paraphrasing. We had no handbook. We learned to invent, with caution, reflection, and qualification, while reassessing our commitment to whatever we thought. Or maybe I could say, to what we thought we thought, as we found all our clichés challenged. Hadn’t we rendered “individualist” a cliché right off the bat? Soon we discovered that metaphor devoid of literal meaning is suspect. As in changing one’s mind. Is that like changing your shirt? Changing a tire? Or is it more like changing a habit?

I have heard that the aim of that course was for us to compose our intellectual autobiographies by way of about eighty short compositions sequenced through a school year, three a week the first semester, two the second. Each year gave birth to a new sequence composed by our instructors. “Now I’ve got you out in the open where I can get at you,” an instructor wrote on a paper soon passed around among that writer’s friends, which prompted among those friends questions such as, were we the writer, would we want to be got at, and was that like being frisked? Meanwhile, dittoed excerpts from our writings were our reading, a fresh set each day, taken from the papers just handed back, and we walked the tightrope always of hoping to be quoted and wary of what our instructor, and classmates, would find fault with if we were.

Surely both Jix and Carl Klaus took an interest in that part of my talk since I was reporting on a format they had come to value. They too were composing writing sequences. My college course, though I didn’t know it at the time, had been a model for their work. Carl told me much later that he and Jix shared their sequences,

leaving them typed in the other's mail slot, as if they were exchanging poems.

Meanwhile another factor was at play. The Iowa Institute on Writing, for directors of first-year courses all across the nation, was being planned and would come to fruition four years later. Jix would lead a seminar on rhetorical theory, Carl one on assignment sequences in composition courses, and that left me, possibly, to lead one on writing across the curriculum of the liberal arts. We didn't have the phrasing yet, but it arose soon after, and our Institute had something to do with that. I was being vetted for that position, and my first-year course made an impression on both Carl and Jix.

In fact they found its influence a little shocking as, having come through my talk all right and finding myself at Iowa, I plunged ahead in the only way I knew: making things up as I went along, constructing my own "momentary stays against confusion," as Frost defined his poems, with no help from a handbook.

So, for the next three years, I experimented with a course I called Writing Science. Not Writing in the Sciences, but Writing Science itself. Right off I discovered that students bringing in work from chemistry, physics, psychology, or whatever other discipline had a hard time reading each other. Each writer was too far into his or her own specialization, and it doesn't take many steps in before you have shut the door behind you. In search of work then that we could share, I came upon a text called *Seeing and Writing*, by Walker Gibson, who had been an instructor at Amherst. He had moved on, but he had taken its first principle with him: challenge writers to invent before you worry about shaping their inventions.

My favorite example from his book was "Reading the Wind," which required building an anemometer and describing the wind it reveals to you. Now, assuming you are willing to try, you can come up with hundreds of possibilities without running out to the nearest airport and copying theirs. Moreover, you can revise and improve your anemometer and share your work with collaborators who may help improve it further, which is a lot like the work of science. Open a bundle of newspapers on the sidewalk and describe how they blow away. Dangle a paper cup full of colored water over a white sheet pegged to the ground; punch a hole in the cup and describe the pattern the water makes on the sheet. Set a series of bottles of water in a row, filled to different levels, and write the music you hear the wind play over them. And in each case, try to define the wind you discover. Is the wind writing its face on the white sheet the same as when it is whistling over bottles?

I came to call this not science but a serious parody of science and worked out possibilities for adjacent disciplines. Go out on a winter night and describe movement you find in the stars. Attend a regional girls basketball tournament—it was still six-girl, half-court basketball—and write an ethnography of what you observe. Will the game or the rival gatherings of fans be your subject? Go to an exhibition of unfamiliar art—African masks and pots was one opportunity—and sketch several classifications. These assignments carried over to our Institute. In one planning session, I was describing them to Jix and Carl. They were a little

taken aback. In spite of their commitment to invention-first sequences, they still seemed to hope I had a helpful handbook of rules in me somewhere, a dependable structure, or series of modulated structures, that would smooth the way for writing in the sciences, the social sciences, and humanities. But I had no such thing, and now they were stuck with me. Finally, I think it was Carl who turned to me and said, "Oh, I get it. You're working from the inside out." I had never put it like that to myself, but I quickly said, "Yes," and tried to live up to claims an old course had laid on me. Jix, with his calm, Olympian tolerance, just smiled.

Now I can add what I didn't know enough to say that first afternoon in Iowa since I had not yet been surprised by it. All semester long, in that faraway first year in college, not a single passage was chosen from my work as an example, good or bad, for my fellow students. Our last essay was to serve as our exam. It was to be a couple of pages longer and, for the first time, addressed no particular question. I was on my own.

I wrote of work one summer during high school when I signed on to pour cement atop a series of grain elevators rising over the rooftops and shade trees of our midwestern, county seat town. Once the pouring started, crews were needed around the clock, and I joined the night crew, from eleven to seven. Meditative, soul-searching time, especially at seventeen, even if one does not think to say so. We rose to work by standing on the open rim of the big cement bucket, rising between the running cables that lifted it to the working deck. We kept our hands close to the cables for an illusory sense of safety. You couldn't cling to them, but their presence offered a frame within which you stood upright and balanced. The bucket rim was about as wide as a piece of railroad track. We stood a little sideways on it and so were hoisted several stories off ground. Rising upward, we savored our daring and exposure. If I slipped, I'd try to fall into the cement, not to the earth. This was long before OSHA. Once on top, where flimsy board railings served more as warnings than true restraints from falling off, we stood level with our well-lit courthouse dome. There we sorted and placed steel reinforcing rods and pushed wheelbarrows of cement along plank runways over mesh-covered forms to wherever a new load was needed. Once my barrow lurched so that I stumbled toward a rail, and a co-worker caught my arm and steadied me. I won't say I would have plunged through the flimsy plank railing and fallen, but I might have. I remember seeing the ground beneath me for half a second before I caught myself, as he caught me, and I remember the smile we exchanged as he steadied me, and I regained my footing.

A classmate already known to have served time in the state reform school was also on the job. One night he stood below, patting his windbreaker pocket, asking men if they wanted to see what he had. He said he had a gun. Eventually he rose up top on the bucket rim. But he never got to work. The foreman wanted to see the gun and then wanted to take it. Marion wouldn't permit that, so the foreman dismissed him on the spot. It's a persistent image, Marion standing with a few men atop an adjacent tower, their voices accenting the shadowy, summer night,

not angry but insistent. Then Marion turning and descending on the bucket's rim. He looked small enough once below, his shoulders hunched, striding off into the night. He didn't come back to school that fall and never returned to us.

I've long since lost that essay, but my instructor found in it, from me, for the first and only time, a note of my being out in the open, unfrisked, perhaps, and venturing exposure. A long swatch of it was the lone example he offered our class on our last day. A classmate who had been in that same section surprised me by reminding me of my essay at our fiftieth reunion. Now a physician, he remembered detail, after fifty-four years, and so reminded me. He remembered because he felt he had learned something: as he put it, writing could be indirect and be the better for it. He said that moment confirmed his scientific bent, just as my mediocrity in a required calculus-physics course tipped me in the opposite direction, which led almost twenty years later to Iowa.

Where, over a good many years, I gradually discovered something like a principle of writers and writing. Many writers, most perhaps, when tasked with writing as a task, begin looking for an exit almost as soon as they start. "How can I get out of here?" is their guiding question. Others, fewer, writers you don't really have to teach although you may be able to coach, take to the page wondering what they can do with it, how they can make that page, and the next one, open up. If you could give the first group of writers the advantage of the second, our problems of teaching Judy and Johnny to write would be solved. The assignment sequence I struggled with and those we invented later attack that problem. Insofar as they manage to engage the student as a person, that person, almost a writer, begins to sense within the self ideas and feelings as yet undiscovered. It's as if one is surprised by finding a forgotten item in a pocket that it would be best to take out and look at before that pocket gets picked. Holding it, looking at it more closely, and rubbing it up a bit leads to invention, while invention summons an inventor.

Taking this a step further, I would suggest that invention stems from seeing intently. Quick leaps to what you think is there, without looking closely, almost always land on clichés. I am reminded of several writing texts from years ago. They liked to posit four kinds of writing: description, explanation, narration, and argument. Furthermore they organized those kinds as a hierarchy with description on the bottom, argument on top. Right off I scoffed at the suggestion that argument should outrank all the great narratives—whichever ones you care to name. But I realized too that the context was our preparation of first-year students for future academic work, most of which would in fact privilege argument. It probably took me another decade, maybe two, to go further and focus on description as much more than just work to be got over quickly before the serious stuff. Fresh description is what counts. Writers who make that discovery work from new ground where they can be "got at." Perhaps frisked. But that's where a writer's adventure begins.

All of this took us a long way, and I had the privilege of teaching writing for years with Carl and Jix, and a host of colleagues who became friends: Paul Diehl,

Susan Lohafer, Carol de St. Victor, Fred Woodard, John Harper, Brooks Landon, Patricia Foster, Jeff Porter, Robin Hemley, and John D'Agata. First came the Institute of 1979–1981, then the Nonfiction Writing Program that started shortly before and has gone much further. Collectively, we went a long way in our efforts but not all the way. We never solved the problem of making a good writer of someone for whom writing remains a task, or for whom—and it's usually the same writer—description relies on recitation of what is mostly known. The sequences Jix and Carl devised, like those that fixed my old college course in the memories of a generation of Amherst students, were one way of addressing the problem: invention first. That our Nonfiction M.F.A. Program has leaned more and more toward invention means that its applicants, and then participants, come to us having discovered motives for writing that they can describe in detail. Thus they seduce us into sharing their interests. In effect, the page is already their pasture, and playground: they have made sequences of their own writing already. Usually it's hard to keep up.