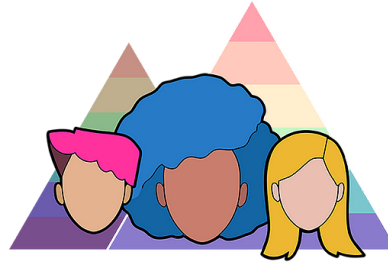


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qmwproject Jul 26 7 min read

Response to Student Evaluations, Sarah E. Smith

Updated: Aug 6

You've asked me to write a response to my student evaluations.

I'm sitting in my living room, my feet are cold because I haven't been wearing shoes. Who wears shoes to work at home?

My dog runs into the room and then looks at me and runs out. "If you pee on the carpet one more time, I swear to god!" I yell in his direction.

My students have heard me yell the same thing at him during class. "The quiz on this section will be an asynchronous OH MY GOD YOU DID NOT JUST DO THAT TO MY CARPET AGAIN essay and it will be available on Blackboard all week."

You want me to write about teaching this semester?

Teaching during the pandemic has been an exercise in balancing the utterly mundane with the profoundly traumatic—the sort of things that alter your soul.

Click here, to enter your course prefix designator, number, and section, says the form.

 **Let's Chat!**

I stare at it.

*

Two months into lockdown, it occurred to me I had not driven my car.

I went to try to start it, and the seats were covered with a grey fuzz: mildew, mold. Spores floated in the air as the rain fell outside.

As I sprayed the seats with a bleach solution, I answered a video call from a student. It was finals week. The university was offering a pass/fail option. My students had been calling me to talk over what they should do.

“Let me go to the porch,” I said. I sat down at the patio table. The sun came out. The sun went away.

My student was sitting at her kitchen table. A small child climbed onto her lap. Climbed off of it. “I don’t know what to do,” she said. “I can’t do anything. My husband is dead. I don’t have anyone to help with my son. I’m not someone who doesn’t *do* things.”

“Honey,” I said. “You have done enough work this semester already. I will pass you right now, right here. Take the pass. Walk away. It is *okay* to do the bare minimum. It is okay not to be okay.”

There was a choke in her voice when she answered. “It’s not okay,” she said. “It’s not okay.”

And I knew it wasn’t.

A spore of mold blew up into my face as the wind lifted some of the debris from my shirt.

The stink of it.

It was mundane.

It was soul-altering.

*

Every class, as we waited to start, I would ask my students (blue squares on the video conference screen) if they had any gossip. “I need something,” I said. “Any catfights? Anyone get really drunk and moon their neighbors? Anyone’s roommate cheat on their boyfriend? I am desperate here.”

Sometimes there would be a “no :(” in the chat.

Usually just silence.

Once, a student turned on their microphone. “Okay, well,” they said. “There is a goose that lives on my dorm roof.”

“I’m listening,” I said.

“Used to be two geese. Now it is one. No one knows what happened to the second goose.”

“Oh my god a breakup,” I said. “Thank you, this is what I am talking about.”

I'm so lonely, I wanted to say. I'm just so lonely.

I didn't say that.

*

The night before the first day of school this semester, my 14-year-old daughter wrote a suicide note and swallowed an entire bottle of pills.

“I'm sorry,” she said as we drove to the emergency room, “I love you but I don't want to do this anymore, I can't do this anymore.”

The emergency room was guarded by police, stopping everyone outside. “Only one parent is allowed in peds,” they told us.

I couldn't stop crying and so my wife said she would go, that she could talk to them better than I could.

She went to the pediatric area but five minutes later, she was sent back. “They said I can't go in,” she said. “They said only the bio mom could go. That it has to be you.”

I tried to breathe but felt like I could not.

The last thing I had expected to have to fight, this night, in the ER, with my desperately ill child, was homophobia.

I did not make it to the first day of class.

I did not make it to the second, either.

*

The third semester into the pandemic, I broke down and I bought a fancy beauty light. The circular lights are marketed to YouTubers, Instagram influencers. They go behind the camera, light up your face online.

I had taught my second semester in the dark, mostly in my pajamas. I didn't do my hair. I didn't put on makeup. I didn't know how to talk to faceless blue squares on a screen and I felt crazy, waving my hands in the living room.

“Aristotle was gross,” I said once. “I hate him more than I hate Leibniz and let me tell you I don't care if that jerk did invent calculus, he was better at hitting on women than I will ever be and I won't forgive him for it.”

I took a drink of soda.

There was silence.

I put down the soda and picked up my coffee.

A note came into the chat. "That was really funny professor," it said.

I stared at it.

I had forgotten I wasn't alone, sitting alone in the dark.

I hadn't even realized I'd told a joke.

When my beauty light arrived, I set it up next to my bookshelves. I started to put makeup back on again.

"Ok, well," I said. "There is my face. Now you can all see it. Nice to meet you."

"I know you don't know us," a student wrote. "But we know you, professor. We know you."

*

We spent three days and three nights in the emergency room with my daughter, that first week of the semester. I went home once to sleep. The other nights, I tried to make do in a chair, an empty bed they told me I wasn't allowed to sleep in but I did anyway.

A friend texted me in the middle of the night. "Tell me a story," they said. "About your daughter."

I wanted to tell them thank you for holding me together, even at this distance. Even in this awful place. But I just told a story. The room was never dark, the floor smelled like antiseptic. The heart monitor beeped, beeped.

"When do you think there will be a bed?" I asked the doctor.

"I don't know," she said. "There are too many people who need beds. All of the pediatric hospitals are full. There are six others, like your daughter, just here waiting. Loneliness is so... is so deadly. We don't have any beds."

I knew loneliness was deadly.

Three of my students had attempted suicide since the pandemic started.

And I felt it.

I felt it all.

The ER served the same food every breakfast, lunch, dinner. Some sort of meat. Some sort of mush.
A carton of milk.

The hospital smelled like the back of a mask when you are trying to scratch your nose.

I wasn't very hungry anyway.

*

I taught a bioethics class midway through the semester.

Pandemic teaching means you almost never see your student's faces. They are covered in masks, if they are not blue squares on the computer.

I uploaded clips from "The Good Place," and talked about the difference between a Kantian framework and a Utilitarian one.

Bioethics is decided by four core principles:

Beneficence

Nonmaleficence

Autonomy

Justice

What will do the most good. What will do the least harm. What honors our right to make our own choices. What honors the debt we owe to each other.

"I have a case study," I said. "Let's look at it from this framework."

I put the slides up on screen: a ventilator dilemma. When do you take someone off the ventilator when you don't have enough of them? What does the most good? What does the least harm? What honors our autonomy? What honors the debt we owe to each other?

There was a silence.

(There are a lot of silences in pandemic teaching.)

And then a microphone turned on. "We took my grandfather off the ventilator this week," one of my students—a faceless blue square on my screen—said. "Here is how we decided to do it."

I didn't know what to say. I didn't think there was anything I *could* say.

Another microphone turned on. "Last month we had to make the same decision about my dad," another student—another faceless blue square on my screen—said. "Here is how we did it."

I just kept staring at the screen.

I *should* have realized when I put the lesson together that the question was not theoretical. This was not a case study. This was *here*. This was *now*.

But I did not.

I had put together slides because they worked better than writing on the screen. I had uploaded videos because they were more entertaining than I knew how to be, sitting in front of my YouTuber beauty light. I had spoken out loud and asked a question. But I hadn't anticipated the thing I *should* have anticipated.

I held it together until the next class. And then, I opened up a picture of a graph. It was an ugly graph. The colors were bad. The representation of the data was skewed. The intent was deceptive.

"Sometimes badly constructed graphs are just... immoral," I said.

And then I started to cry. On camera. About a graph.

(Not even a little about the graph.)

A microphone turned on. "It's okay, professor," one of the students said. "I could use a crying break too."

*

You want me to write a response to my student evaluations this semester, the same way I have responded to student evaluations every semester. You want me to use the same forms we fill out every semester.

Based upon the student evaluations and my own observations, I believe that the strengths of this course are: (To guide you in preparing your responses, please consider as a "strength" all areas that receive $\geq 75\%$ strongly agree/agree.)

The questions are mundane.

Based upon the student evaluations and my own observations, I believe that the concerns regarding this course are: (To guide you in preparing your responses, please consider as a "weakness" all areas that receive $\geq 25\%$ strongly disagree/disagree.)

They are soul altering.

In light of the strengths/concerns stated above, I will take the following action:

I don't even know what to write.

So many of my friends have left teaching.

My dog runs through the room again.

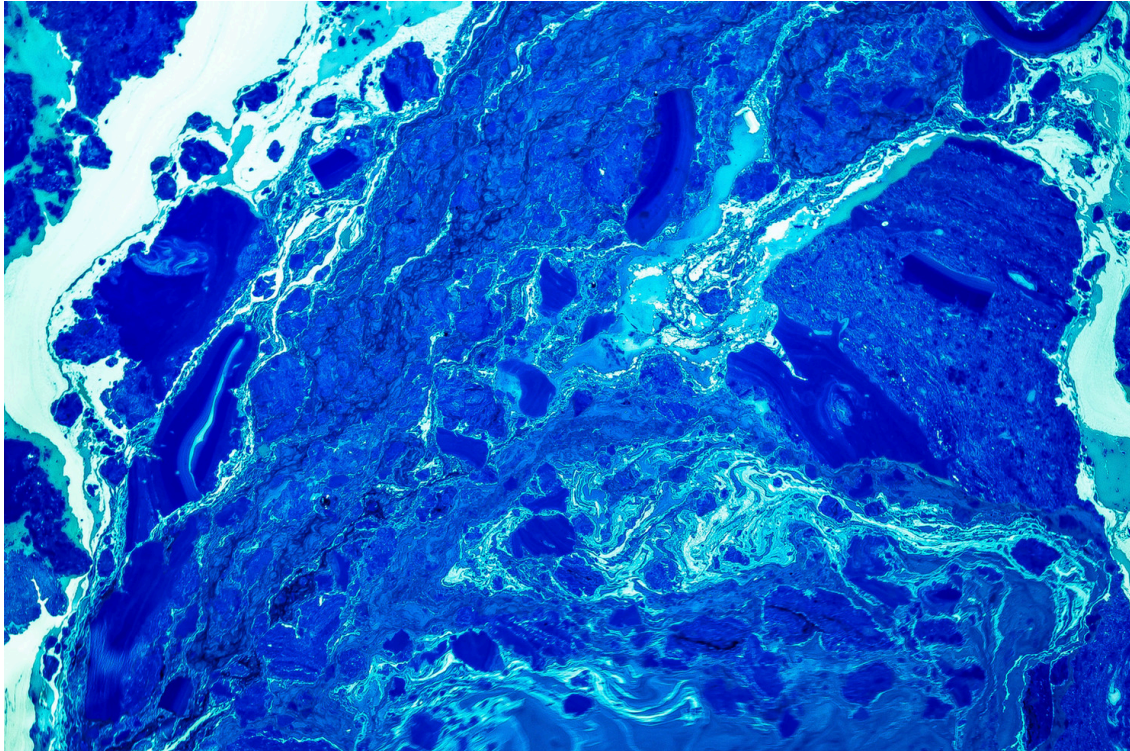
What does it mean, to be a teacher? In a time like this? When you cannot see your students' faces, and yet, you have to offer them your heart?

What does the most good?

What does the least harm?

What is the debt we owe each other?

What is mundane, and what has altered my soul?



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