

Professor White

An anxious message on my answering machine for "Professor White" tossed me into the sea of nostalgia this morning. It has been years since anyone addressed me by that title. I first heard it while in college when Dr. J. Welfred Holmes, my revered Shakespeare instructor, used it to invite my participation in class. "Well, Professor White," he often asked in a deep, sonorous voice, "what do you have to say about the subject at hand."

And I always had a lot to say. By the time I entered Dr. Holmes' class during my junior year at Morgan State College, I had found my element: mine was not the gift of memorizing formulae, dates, and events, but of interpretation.

Though I had entered college with aspirations to become a French translator at the U.N., that year, I decided to major in English, since it seemed to be the area where I excelled. I could go on and on about obvious and hidden meanings in Shakespeare's sonnets and plays. I could draw historical parallels and tie the influence of the times to various authors' works. I loved research and read with pleasure. I wrote creative papers on the lives and work of great figures like Shakespeare, Poe, Blake, Browning, Cather and Lowell.

In reality, I loved the lives of great men and women and was secretly appeased to find that they too had not had easy lives. Their creativity drove them to do what their hearts decreed, even though it was not always what others wanted. In childhood, Superman had been my hero. Like him, I had been thrust down in an alien land and forced to make my way there, while I longed for home. Now, I had new heroes.

Years later, when I was in my mid-30's, I embarked on an intensive research project to discover the paternal side of my family. My parents had separated when I was very young, and I grew up fatherless. Among the gems my research brought me was the fact that both my father and grandfather had elicited the same honorific that I had been given. "Professor White," was a family title.

When I returned the woman's message on my machine, she laughed when I said it had been years since anyone called me "Professor White."

"Anyone who has persevered and achieved, I give due respect to," she said. "And you've certainly done that." Her statement flooded me with satisfaction and inquiry. How could this woman with whom I had only shared a brief telephone interview feel this way about me? Funny how we live our lives beneath a lampshade. Emitting light but never realizing how far it reaches.

After I hung up the phone, I looked up the word "professor" in my Webster's Unabridged Dictionary. These are two of the many meanings it gave: "A person who professes something, especially one who openly declares his sentiments; a teacher, especially a college teacher of the highest rank." I had always thought the title "professor" was reserved for faculty luminaries like Dr. Holmes, not for lowly undergraduates. I had assumed that Dr. Holmes called me "Professor" because I was the only student in his class who carried a briefcase - albeit tapestry covered. Now, I realize that he called me "professor" as a tribute to the potential he saw in me. His nurturing has followed me through the years.

Though I have worked hard to avoid becoming a teacher like both my parents and paternal grandparents, I cannot escape my destiny. I have a master's degree but no teaching credentials; however, I have been tapped to teach at Morgan State University, Mercy College, and Westchester Community College. I have taught classes for the International Association of Fire Fighters, the Hudson Valley Writers Centers, and the National Writers Union. I am regularly sought out to lecture and give talks at schools, churches, colleges, and for community groups where I openly express my sentiments about the gift of life and the responsibilities it carries. I have truly become a professor.