

On Being Afraid of Students | Just Visiting

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A blog by John Warner, author of the story collection *Tough Day for the Army*, and a novel, *The Funny Man*, on teaching, writing and never knowing when you're going to be asked to leave.

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By

[John Warner](#)

To my memory, I have never been physically afraid *of* a student.

The maddest I've ever seen a student was one calling me a "life ruining motherfucker," when I told the student that passing the course was mathematically impossible.

This was early in my graduate school career as a freshman comp TA, and I was taken aback in the moment, shocked into silence. The student stormed off before I said another word.

The incident obviously stuck with me since it happened more than 20 years ago. In the immediate aftermath I was shaken, not because I was afraid that the student would return seeking revenge, but because I was worried that the student was right, that I had done something that had ruined this young person's life.

Experience tells me that I was not guilty of that particular sin. Something else was going on to cause someone to be

mathematically out of range of a passing grade before the final assignment is even turned in. As an instructor, I was awfully green, but not so terrible that students were doomed to failure.

That I have never experienced physical threat or intimidation is likely a product of who I am and what I teach or maybe just plain luck. I have witnessed male students attempt to physically intimidate female instructors, including one incident where a colleague told a student invading her personal space in a pretty clear attempt at a threat that he needed to “back the fuck off before someone gets hurt.”

He did.

I admired the response, but as I saw her shake with a combination of anger and fear in the aftermath, I also recognized what it cost her.

I don't really want to think about being afraid of my students. It doesn't strike me as conducive to teaching well. If or when I start to consider students as even potential enemies, I will leave the classroom entirely.

But events like the murder of UCLA Professor William Klug at the hands of a student who ended his own life, reportedly over personal grievances, makes one think, at least a little. It is so shocking because it is so rare, but it can be hard to adhere to the rational in these moments.

I also have to remember that just because I've never been given reason to fear my students, this may not be the reality for others.

While I have never been afraid *of* my students, I've had many occasions to be afraid *for* my students. I have witnessed students with apparent addiction problems, or wrapped up in destructive personal relationships, or precarious living situations. One student who could not stay awake in class was later diagnosed with PTSD originating in an anxiety disorder, exacerbated by an attempt at pledging a fraternity.

Illness, family issues, money problems...it's a pretty good bet that a significant number of students are going through something we should be worried about at any given time during the semester.

[Reports](#) from Los Angeles indicate that the murderer's motives were personal, taking the life of his spouse first. He apparently held delusions about being wronged by Prof. Klug. Prof. Klug supposedly went out of his way to help the killer's career as a mentor.

I don't know what to make of all this. I'd like to think that a student targeting a professor is more likely when the professor is viewed as an impersonal representative of an oppressive institution, rather than a friend and mentor.

But that belief is belied by the fact that most violence is done to those known personally to the perpetrator. [Sixty-five percent of women](#) who are victims of violent crime are harmed by their intimate partners. I admit to being surprised by this statistic when I looked it up. I shouldn't have been.

As an instructor, there are limits to what I can do when I become afraid *for* my students. When I am concerned about their physical or mental well-being my institution has procedures for reporting concerns to those who are trained and empowered to intervene.

At best, I can practice a pedagogy that takes student wellbeing into account. This is why I've moved towards policies and procedures that acknowledge what I believe to be an [“anxiety crisis”](#) rooted in an era where the work of studenting appears to be particularly emotionally fraught.

I do this because I want to give students enough slack in certain areas so I can push them in others. I want to make the course rigorous in ways that count when it comes to learning and development. When they “underperform” I want to take a beat and at least for a moment consider reasons other than they're “entitled” or “slackers.”[\[1\]](#)

I don't want to overreact to tragedies like the murder of Prof. Klug and the killer's spouse.

But I can't ignore it either.

[1] An anecdote that I think of to remind of the importance of this. One semester I had a student who was borderline comatose and non-responsive in our early morning class. The work wasn't too bad, but I'd begun to think the student was burning the candle at both ends, showing up to class with a brain toasted from partying. At the end of the semester, during individual conferences this student was scheduled for the afternoon, and it was like a different person walking in the door. Alert, engaged...groomed. I said something in the conference and the student indicated that they'd been struggling with a sleep disorder, and that early morning classes were a serious problem, to the extent that the student was working to be certified with a disability that allowed for only afternoon classes. I don't think my wrong impressions ultimately impacted the student's grades, but it was a lesson in how the limited interaction of class can lead me astray.

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