



“Touching the Real”

I entered college believing I would become a journalist. That changed when I was cast as a handmaid in a stage production of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. I spent the next three years living and breathing theater. The beautiful (and for most of us never to be recaptured) thing in college is you get to keep making theatre with people you love over and over again for multiple years. I think most of us in the theater program at University of Puget Sound pursued it more because of that joy than for our own personal drive. It was the joy and intensity of our collective experience that kept us hooked. But the fact that we had such an experience was not an accident.

Our department director, Dr. Geoff Proehl, was the reason it could be like that. He created the inviting space. He set the emotionally courageous tone. He helped us touch the experience of living transparently with and to one another. I don’t think there is a more holy space to me than the Norton Clapp theatre. It’s my ur-stage. A place that will always be present in my dreams. During a retirement celebration for Geoff in 2019, I went back and sat in that theater once again. I kept staring at the vomms, I longed only to stand in them. That waiting to enter, in dim light, felt like everything.

The world seems most of the time to ask so little of us, such a shallow level of engagement, such a little amount of courage. The stage asks much more. I think we at University of Puget Sound all longed for that: a place to be more human. To feel loudly, to show off big, to desire passionately, to spit at the shit of the world, to try to break through, to dredge out what was buried deepest inside of us and show it, good or bad, in the light. That’s the beauty of the actor – that they *want* to do that. Though I chose playwriting and not acting as my path, it still brings me to tears today when I see that kind of actor. They’re doing it for themselves, but they’re also doing it for us, being courageous for us, so we might be.

Maybe in a perfect society there would be no need for theater, but probably there would. Real life, even when good, demands stability and repetition and, as a result, a kind of mold grows over our existence, cushioning our skins and hearts against life’s rich texture. Good theatre rips that cushion off. You know it when you feel it. Your heart goes up in your throat, your eyes get bigger, you get shivers, you might even cry without knowing exactly why.

It can be lonely to long for the rawness of life among people who are happily buried in their layers (Beckett’s *Happy Days* comes to mind). So it was good, so good at Geoff’s retirement

tribute, to be among those people who had been, twenty years prior, so similarly dissatisfied with that way of life, who were not thinking too much or at all about jobs during their four years in college, who truly followed their hearts. And I do believe deep down that people like this are everywhere, waiting to be given the courage to climb out, the faith to know it's not unsafe and that that space, outside the cushion of habit, is where real life happens. I fear so many people's lives, at a certain point of stability, maybe around middle age, devolve into strategy. Strategy. Life gets easy enough that we can "master" it and "win." But the truth is that win or lose at that game, we're left with nothing in the end.

I wrote a play called *Losing the Game* in my MFA program a couple years after undergrad. I guess because I was obsessed with this idea of us all being caught in an unspoken game. At 45, I know now the game will never go away, there will always be plenty who want to play and, frankly, we all have to play, to an extent.

But I also know with unshaken faith that there's a much bigger realness all around us and, for me, theatre helps me get at that realness, in all its texture. I need that. I will always have the foundation my college experience gave me of making art with others in an environment of radical trust and open-heartedness. I will always be trying, remembering to recreate that in my present and future theater experiences.

Theater is the space where we shake off the dust of habit and push down the walls of enculturation to come in contact, fully human, with what is real. The invisible, terrifying, humbling, overwhelming, exhilarating *real*. Every play is a new adventure to see what real can be touched by actors and, in turn, if the job is well done, by the audience. And I'm so thankful to be on that journey again with my new play *Apostates, PA*. I can't wait to share that journey at our staged reading on January 20th.

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