

Travis Gatewood
Statement of Philosophy

“The rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy’s wing” – *The Great Gatsby*

It’s a cold February morning and I am basking in the warm technicolor glow of an overhead projector in my classroom trying to do my literary magic, to make a text mean something to a room of drowsy students who have stumbled in from the dark and snow. We are discussing *Gatsby*, the poor midwestern farm boy who reached for a green light, who took an invisible stairway to the sky, who created the rock of the world from a fairy’s wing, who dreamed an incorruptible dream.

And as we are talking my eyes move to the back of the room, to the small humble studio where students from my Video Production class have cobbled together videos for the past twelve years. And I see them there, both my former students and the words of Fitzgerald, floating like ghosts in the blue flickering beam of LED projector light. I see them, the holograms of old students, age sixteen, working with tiny cameras on small screens fumbling with their footage while dreaming big dreams.

And I remember that next Monday I will be sitting in the cozy red upholstery of a vintage movie theater to watch *Oz The Great and Powerful*, a film brought to life in part by one of those former students who tinkered in the dusty cramped corner of my classroom. And I think about the photo from Los Angeles sent to me last summer of six former students from six different years sitting all together around a sleek yellow table in a trendy downtown spot wishing me the best as they continue to sweat for their dreams in the great golden west, this table of writers, directors, and actresses who first dared to dream of what they could be while sitting in the brown laminate desks of my classroom, much like the students now in front of me who are starting to see what I mean, starting to get the lessons of *Gatsby*, as I share with them this same story.

And I think that maybe I too am a little bit of a wizard, that this is the magic trick that we try to do as teachers—to flip the switch, to light the spark, to hopefully make rocks from wings, worlds from dreams, to empower and inspire our students to strive and reach for a good full life that is everything they imagine it to be. And the trick starts with me getting the students to see their life as a story, nothing more, nothing less, a book written by their own hand, a vast field of white paper to be inked by them, a narrative of experiences shared with an intimate band of family and friends, the characters of a tale that I hope they wish to tell, a story of weight and value, a story for which they feel proud.

In order to help my students to write a meaningful life story, my job is to make the process seamless, invisible, to do the hard necessary labor in the shadows so that my students see the act of learning as fluid and natural, so that they feel a part of the magic in the classroom, that they feel connected, that the experience means something, that the literature is relevant. I need to make them see that their story is a part of a larger human conversation, that at its core literature involves a person writing to other people, that it is necessary, fundamental, part of us, in our genetic makeup. It connects us, cutting across all disciplines and professions. It is about understanding issues, concepts, perspectives, and motivations. To read is to engage in the study of language and culture. It is a pathway into worlds never seen before but also a reexamination of the familiar. Through the reading of literature and the practice of writing, I want my students to stretch their schemata—their templates of perception—in new and different ways so that they better understand what it is to be human, so that they are better equipped

to make decisions about their futures, so that they know the possibilities and potentials from which to choose, so that they have the tools to do in life what they wish to do.

To accomplish this task, to make this statement of philosophy transform from a dream to a world, I must check my ego at the door. I must create a space about my students. I must teach with empathy and humility in order to foster relationships. I must win trust and respect. I must be a servant. I must work for the common good, to do no harm, to be a champion for their cause, to show that I am invested in helping them, that my class has purpose, that it is a positive step in the right direction, that we are fellow participants on a shared journey towards an intended destination. All my pedagogy, all my preparation and practice, my readings and assignments, must be focused on this goal and held to this standard.

To teach is as much art as it is content. Because sometimes students come apathetic and reluctant, sometimes hurt and lost, and I must work through the fatigue and frustration to find ways to lift and engage them, to help them to find a guiding vision, to give them the strength and confidence and motivation to lift the pen and write their story with a sense of excitement and purpose. Teaching is an act never completed, always in flux, never quite mastered, always with something to tweak, scrap, do-over. I must plan and reflect, enrich and differentiate in order to meet the demands of students who come to my classroom with a diversity of backgrounds and agendas. I must continue to push and reinvent to stay relevant, to make them see that I am working in their best interest. I must be determined and resilient in the face of doubts and defeats, in the struggle that is the cluster of curriculum, budget, workload, and bureaucracy.

I must find ways to stay fresh and passionate, to continue to rediscover the intrinsic rewards of the profession, to avoid the pitfalls of burn out and stagnation, to keep my own story evolving and inventive. It's partly what took me to the mountains of Guatemala to work in an orphanage last summer. As a father of two girls from Guatemala, I had always wanted to give back to the country which gave me so much, but I always found reasons not to make the trip. It was last year when reading *Into the Wild* with my students that I questioned my transparency as a teacher. I needed to practice what I preached. I needed to stand for my beliefs. Through Chris McCandless we had discussed how far we were willing to go for our dreams. I needed to be doing these same things.

It was in Guatemala that I found redemption and rejuvenation. It was with the children of the orphanage where I was taught life lessons—from Hector who had panhandled since the age of seven, from Reyna who had been burnt with irons, from Benito who has no public records of his existence. When we rode our bikes through the coffee fields and cinderblock towns, the children told me tales full of dreams, of suffering and healing, of still looking towards the future with open hearts full of love, hope, and innocence. They reminded me that I cannot lose my sense of empathy. I must devote myself to helping my students to believe that their story means something, that they have the power to make their own magic, to rise above their situation, to find their voice and have a choice, to feel that they have flexibility and options, to do what they want through their work and talent. As teacher I need to perform from the heart in order to help students find a life worth fighting for.

I can't just pat myself on the back when I teach an AP Scholar or National Merit Semifinalist, when I coach a professional athlete or advise a movie producer. It's easy to bask in the accolades of those kind of front page news stories. It's harder emotionally to deal with the anonymity, the small private stories that surface occasionally, of students who carry burdens in silence, who need someone to hear them

like the girl who in her personal essay told me that she had started to cut herself again or the boy at my desk who told me he had been living out of his car since last weekend or the former student who reached out with an email this winter to tell me he was depressed and lost and needing a way out of the fog. Teaching is a vocation, a lifestyle, a 24/7 gig. It never ends. It takes endurance and investment that goes well beyond grading and instruction. I need to be present, to put forth my best effort, to be ready to step up when more than just studying metaphors, gerunds, or semicolons is needed.

But, yes, teaching starts with content. It took me two years of frenetic late nights and harried runs to the copy machine for me to find my feet, to know my stuff, to be good enough to get to what I consider real teaching. And I still strive for transparency, each year refining, trying to get to the point where each day contributes to the next in a series of interconnected steps of a dynamic process built upon interdisciplinary and multimedia methods. It is why I created a WordPress website, a Facebook page, and a Twitter account in order to open source my classroom, to make it available to students, parents, and teachers. It is why my English students do enrichment credit, go into the community for culture in order to transcend their boxes, to think bigger, different. It is why they write satirical newspapers, deliver This I Believe speeches, shoot poetry videos. It is why they post secrets on the classroom wall in order to feel less alone and vulnerable. It is why my Video Production students edit television features, perform live radio shows, attend national conventions, network with local businesses, organize spirit events, run school assemblies, deejay in the community. Because the biggest trick of a teacher is to get the students to believe that the classroom is all about them, to feel a sense of ownership, to put their personal stamp on the process, to feel empowered and encouraged, to grow as leaders.

And here I am, now a week later, driving home late at night from the movie theater, having watched a story about a wizard, then afterwards staying to talk to former students and shake the hands of their parents. And I am thinking about the greatest privilege of teaching, the influence and reach, the planting of seeds in the hope of growing dreams that spread like infinite shoots from the classroom, that continue to produce fruit beyond you—the immeasurable and sustaining joy of simply creating and sharing something which you love—to plant seeds, create dreams, tell stories, make magic—for just as the movie told me, if I can make my students believe, then I will be wizard enough.