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# Parting Words: Professor Pruitt

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By Liza Palmer

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'Liza? It's John.'

John? John Pruitt? Professor Pruitt? 'Oh, hi, Professor Pruitt – how are you?' while quickly racking my brain to figure out why on earth my professor could be calling me on my private dorm phone during my senior year living in the Feitler Co-op at Bard College. Even though I had taken every class (credit or audit) with the man that I could for all my four years at the college, and he had been instrumental in my return to Bard after what seemed like the obligatory transfer to NYU for my sophomore year, I resisted referring to him as 'John'. And he politely ignored my resistance until, finally, while I was in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he leveled with me and said – in his kind and reasoned way – words to the effect of: I'm not really your professor anymore; you're going to have to call me by name one of these days. Hard to break old habits, though, and honorifics always mattered to me. I think I managed to dance around saying John throughout the entirety of our relationship.

It turns out, that day, Professor Pruitt wanted to borrow my car because his was on the fritz. Looking back now, how odd that

was! Who borrows his student's car, especially in this litigious age? But it was par for the course at Bard, where we were essentially all equals (or liked to pretend we were). Indeed, my working life with Professor Pruitt was littered with moments like these – I blame my mother for muddying the waters. You see, during my first year at Bard, I roomed with someone who was intent on transferring out (the right decision for her). This rubbed off and I decided that my unhappiness wasn't to do with me, but with Bard. So I duly applied to NYU and was accepted (a disaster for me). My whole life, I have lived with regret – and the only advance warning my brain usually gives me is a little tinge, late in the change process, where I stop and say, 'hmm, aren't I going to miss this?' I have since learned to stop and listen to that voice instead of forging ahead unthinkingly. Not then, however. Sure enough, after all the transfer decisions had been made, I wrote the paper that got me noticed by Professor Pruitt: 'L'Etoile de Mer: Wishes on a Stippled Star'. I got the coveted A in PRUITT'S INTRO CLASS, the monolith that had been killing dreams of would-be Bard film majors for years, giving me the final grade that was needed to progress in the film department. I still have the paper, which I dusted off for this article. Consider this feedback, handwritten in pencil:

An excellent essay – although I wish it had been longer. One of your writerly strengths – namely your ability to give the reader some credit and not belabor points – does get you into trouble at times where a certain linguistic ambiguity or difficult point does need clarification. At any rate, the essay is particular-

ly effective in the way you forge new ground, building on Sitney's observations – but breaking free of them, too. I will send this to him and if his response is interesting, I'll forward it to you somehow [he must have known, by then, that I was leaving] (Shippey 1996).

This is just the first page and a half of his critique – he goes on for three full pages, not including page-specific comments! I haven't gotten such detailed analysis from anyone else, before or since, and I had to write two theses to graduate from Bard. And this wasn't just a one-off. For comparison, I dug out another paper I had written for him – four full pages of handwritten feedback! Examining his writing closely, there are no errors, no eraser marks, no awkward formulations. He had a clear sense of what he wanted to say and how best to convey it without ever backtracking. A boldness of character and sense of self that I admire so much. It certainly puts me and my grading, these days, to shame.

With this paper, never mind the grade, I existed – suddenly – because I had found a niche. I must have called my mother and told her I was having second thoughts and she, understandably exasperated, called Professor Pruitt. He tried to intervene and change my mind ('Why do you want to go to NYU?' said disdainfully – his own graduate school alma mater, mind you). I heard my little voice, ignored it, and then spent the next year disentangling myself from my latest mistake (my poor parents). My mother rallied, enlisted Professor Pruitt's help once again, and he got me back at Bard. I often say that I wouldn't have graduated from college if not for Bard. When I say that, though, what I



really mean is: if not for Professor Pruitt. He involved himself in my life, sometimes clumsily, but it made all the difference and he didn't have to do it. I babysat for his two delightful toddler daughters (now talented young college students, I imagine!); he encouraged my interest in publishing by finding the funds for me and my fellow co-editor Gordana (Bojovska) Warga to establish the Bard film journal *CineMatrix* (Stan Brakhage and Jane Wodening published with us!); he introduced me to influential filmmakers and scholars (I have no doubt that he forwarded my paper to P. Adams Sitney, as promised); he supported my outlandish idea to interview Jane Wodening for my senior thesis, and called in some favors to get me her contact information; he attended my Victorian Studies independent study final project, a boisterous performance of a *Cinderella* pantomime ('Well, that was certainly interesting', tongue only

slightly in cheek); when I graduated, he pulled several rare books off his own home bookshelf and inscribed them to me. Rich, life-defining undergraduate memories, such that they spoiled me for any other educational experience – and they can all be traced back to him.

A true mentor, he never softened blows for me but he worried about my reactions to them. When he would assign me A-grades, he would ask me in person if that was okay (clearly, he lacked the fortitude, face-to-face, that so defined his writing); I was bemused at these moments, thinking he was the instructor, not me, and trusting his judgment even if he didn't. His raw humanity was always a surprise. Once again on the phone during my senior year, this time to let him know that I would be missing yet another seminar (did I really call to let him know such things? Probably not – I most likely

emailed him, a form of communication then in its infancy, and he followed up with a phone call, which was more his style), he probed the reason, concerned about my absences. When I casually mentioned that a family friend had died and my parents wanted me to attend the funeral in upstate New York with them, he was immediately contrite and solicitous, apologizing for my loss as if he had been responsible for it. He felt things deeply beneath his stodgy exterior.

He was also impolitic – no filter – and was then charmingly befuddled when he would realize his rudeness. Case in point: he expressed his surprise that I had decided to take my husband's last name after considering me such an ardent feminist. I wasn't sure whether to be offended or flattered (I think I landed on amused). Reading through his remembrances on the Bard website, though, I'm not alone in these

experiences; Kyle Gann, in a similar situation, described Professor Pruitt as 'utterly melt[ing] and apologiz[ing] so sweetly and with so many reassurances that I felt like an ogre for having brought it up'.<sup>1</sup> Professor Pruitt had strong feelings about graduate school, which he communicated both directly and indirectly. I suspect that he had a bad experience himself while pursuing his master's degree at NYU, although we never specifically discussed it. And certainly the lack of a Ph.D. must have been a stumbling block in his academic career. In the opening paragraph of a review he wrote for *Millennium Film Journal* are clues to how he felt about academics and their products: 'Though it is a reworked doctoral thesis, it carries little of the redundancies and wearisome tone which mar most of that sort of writing', and, '[h]ers is not a method which is overcrowded with the latest of theoretical fashions transforming the actual material under discussion unto an embarrassing impertinence' (Pruitt 1995). When – surprise, surprise – I was struggling with the transition to graduate school from Bard, he was on the phone with me again, shocked to hear that they were still teaching Metz and Bellour, telling me that graduate school was a 'dead culture'. I happened to mention this to my graduate school professors, which went over about as well as you can imagine (a subsequent Professor Pruitt phone call: 'You told them that?!'). In some ways, I felt like I was making – not learning from – mistakes that Professor Pruitt had himself made; that, through me, he could visualize and reflect on his own past choices (and perhaps be glad of them).

But all of these facets gave shape to the fascinating man that he was: Always elegantly dressed – dapper, even – in linen suits and

fedora-like hats (a roguish touch). Generous with his friends and connections, not guarded or possessive, like many academics can be; he genuinely enjoyed it when his friends got on together and would beam with pride for facilitating such engagements. A true public thinker who could connect up Henry James, Wallace Stevens, Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage and avant-garde film in the same breath, who simply liked to ramble through thoughts without a solution as destination. An engaged teacher and brilliant lecturer. An elegant writer who should have published more. A devoted father who showed much empathy for even the most minor of troubles (i.e., his daughter's diaper rash). A proud husband who bragged about his wife's editing credits in John Sayles's films. He was content, basically, to take a back seat in life – he didn't need to be the driver. He was confident in his knowledge and could come off as arrogant when fighting his corner; but he was not egotistical where his own work was concerned. In fact, editing – a role he performed for several years for *The Downtown Review* – suited him well, as it does me today. Helping others to shine while avoiding the limelight yourself.

One of my proudest moments – winning the Maya Deren Award, the highest honour for the Film Department, during the senior awards banquet at Bard – was thanks in large part to Professor Pruitt, I'm sure. It was also bitter-sweet, in the way that most good memories calcify for me. That day, I had been babysitting for Professor Pruitt. When he came home to relieve me, he said, cryptically, 'be sure to save me a seat at the awards ceremony tonight'. I nodded, distractedly, and then spent the rest of the afternoon overthinking that one remark. Professor Pruitt couldn't possibly want

to sit next to me, a student, at the awards banquet? Surely, he would rather be with his colleagues? I must have gotten that wrong; he was just making small talk; etc. Fast forward to the event: about half an hour after it had started, Professor Pruitt comes up to my table, flustered and looking for his seat – which, of course, I hadn't saved because he 'couldn't possibly want to sit next to me'. When I won the award, everything all of a sudden made sense – and I felt even more horrible. He approached me later, good-naturedly chastising me, saying that he had wanted to be with me when I won the award, to share my moment (two shadows not used to the limelight, after all). I realized then that we were equally clumsy human beings – casual social situations flummoxed us, the easy stuff was hard, and neither of us could take the lead at those times.

I regret that I could not ever fully make the jump with Professor Pruitt from student to colleague (or, dare I say it, friend). Perhaps, if I had, we would have been more actively involved in each other's lives. When I learned about his death this past June 2019, I was devastated, which may be surprising, given that we hadn't been in contact since 2006, when he visited the University of North Carolina Wilmington to give a talk just after the birth of my son ('Well, he's certainly small'). I remember feeling awkward and lumpen, my breastfeeding child literally tied to me, leaving me unable to attend Professor Pruitt's talk (by all reports, it was a good one). Truth be told, we both might have been glad of the excuse for me not to be there because it was weird trying to figure out what we were to each other if not professor and student. But he is so connected up in my own sense of self, all my successes track back to

him, and I owe him such a great debt – which I can only continue to pay forward with my teaching and editing. John, I wish I had saved you that seat.

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### Endnote

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1. <https://www.annandaleonline.org/s/990/bp18/interior.aspx?sid=990&gid=1&pgid=2996>. Accessed 9 January 2020.

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