

April 2010

## A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Teaching English

Jane Focht Hansen

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/trickstersway>

---

### Recommended Citation

Focht Hansen, Jane (2010) "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Teaching English," *Trickster's Way*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 1.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/trickstersway/vol2/iss4/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Trickster's Way by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

## *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Teaching English*

**Jane Focht-Hansen**

When Frank Kersnowski and Bill Spinks invited me to participate in this Festschrift to honor Dr. Brantley, I was flattered. I hadn't really thought about my education at Trinity much recently, not since I'd had a conflict trying to understand why, in 1990, UTSA wanted me to take an additional 12 hours of undergraduate English to qualify to apply to their graduate English program.

I actually had limited contact with Dr. Brantley; I never took even one of his courses. But I did read the booklist for one of his postmodern classes, and I relied on him to help me navigate my way to graduation.

I was a refugee from Journalism, Broadcasting and Film. After an advisor told me that I'd be taking an additional and third year at Trinity to complete the JB program, I walked across the street to Northrup Hall and sought out my peer advisor Debbie Bragg. Bragg was Dr. Brantley's much relied upon work-study assistant, and my friend Maria Lim's roommate. If anyone could help me, I knew she could. Of course, Bragg set up an appointment for me with Dr. Brantley later in the week.

As I had always enrolled in an English course every semester, I knew I had enough hours to sustain a change in major. When I met with Dr. Brantley to query the possibility of being accepted as an English major, I was delightfully surprised. There was no question. After reviewing my transcript, he made a quick call to the registrar and the two of them agreed that with Dr. Brantley's recommended degree plan, I'd graduate on schedule with a B.A. in English in May, 1981.

Whew! Robert Brantley saved my life!! What I recognize now is that he also changed my career aspirations. It took some maturity to distinguish it, but I am forever indebted to him and his motley faculty crew for opening my eyes to myriad possibilities. Along with some rather fabulous folks who inspired me at San Antonio College, John Igo among them, I came to recognize that teaching English was my destiny, *mywyrd*, my vocation.

Young as I was, I lacked the depth to comprehend just what Trinity's English department faculty ignited in me. And thinking back on what transpired, I have made some rich discoveries.

Dr. Brantley influenced me to become a postmodern. I studied the conflict of it--the place of the postmodern human stuck in between the idea that God is in charge and I'd better behave or suffer, and the notion that no one is in charge

Trickster's Way Vol 2

and I could do as I pleased. There are obvious empowerments and contradictions to both of these perspectives.

If I made no choices and gave my destiny over to God, I lacked personal power. If I did as I pleased and screwed the consequences, then I'd be caught in some sort of great postmodern dilemma. Forgiven or not, moral or not, at Trinity I learned the full measure of "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." The world is Newtonian, but people are relative.

How can I explain what exposure to Brantley's teaching Coover's *Pricksongs and Descants* did for me, anymore than I can relate how Tom Robbins convinced me that life is one big philosophical cafeteria line?

Oddly enough, the origin of my understanding my place in the world came through some interesting filters. First, Frank Kersnowski led me into modern poetry, modern drama, and poetry writing. I began confronting the contradictions of the postmodern world through a panoply of literature, from Levertov to Synge.

I studied French feminist Julia Kristeva with Bill Spinks. And he introduced me to *Another Roadside Attraction*, Tom Robbins' second novel. Ten years later, I began a thesis on *Spirituality in the Novels of Tom Robbins*. It rests among the theses at the St. Mary's University Library.

I tried to be intelligent discussing Shakespeare with Dave Middleton. I also took his Children's Literature course. After a summer mini-mester with Karl Kregor, I listed Woody Allen on my degree plan as my study of a major writer. I could, of course, because I had studied the bard.

I met Stephen Spender after picking him up at the airport in Ken Staggs' VW Rabbit. There were three of us, the entire enrollment of a Nineteenth Century American Literature class, crammed into the backseat, with Spender folding his large, gangly frame into the front seat across from Dr. Staggs. Here's another tidbit about the folding over of experience—his wife was my eighth and ninth grade advisor at Longfellow Junior High.

Where else could I have acquired a traditional education in English smattered with the modern, postmodern, and feminist? Many places, I'm certain, but could I have enjoyed being immersed in the grace and generosity of scholarship which was the hallmark of Brantley's English department? Are there stewards of such an approach teaching today? I hope so.

Maybe it falls to me to be that for my students. What causes me to take the time to help my students solve their dilemmas? The influence of the models with whom I studied, many of them at Trinity. The result strongly suggests that academic departments under the leadership of scholars like Brantley extends the continuum of such influence.

I am a fortunate person. My life has folded over, experience upon experience,

Trickster's Way Vol 2

to the point that I have come full circle, still the student, but also the peer of the likes of Brantley, Kersowski, Spinks. My office mate, poet Carol Coffee Reposa, taught me poetry writing at St. Mary's, became my friend, and helped me to connect with her dear friends the Kersnowskis, who are fast friends with the Spinkses. And sometimes I pinch myself, am I that immature kid who went to Trinity, dining with my professors, or am I one of them?

Cheers to Dr. Brantley for his amazing leadership, kind influence, graceful scholarship. It's funny what happens on the way to becoming a professional. Sometimes, everything just works out. Certainly this English gig has for me. And for Dr. Brantley too, I hope. Bravo, kind sir. Thanks, and ever thanks.