

When I was a junior in college I went to an undergraduate literature conference out in Ogden, Utah. I don't know how I ended up doing it. I think I literally saw a poster on a wall somewhere on my campus and applied. It wasn't the kind of thing I usually did. I flew out there by myself and stayed overnight at someone's house - I don't even know who it was. When I think back on it, it was really strange. But it was a big experience for me because I had some poems accepted to present there as a poetry reading and then other students in the conference really liked the poems and we went out afterwards and they wanted to talk to me about how I wrote, and it felt like a thing I could do and wanted to become a bigger part of. It was Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, and I think I did it in the fall of 95 or maybe it was spring of 96.

When I was a sophomore in college I had a chance to go to Oxford University in England for a month on a January short course with my undergrad college. I had a faculty member who met with me once a week and talked with me about my fiction and gave me things to read and think about and then write stories of my own. It meant something to me because she said something in our last session like, "No bullshit. You're really good. You should keep doing this." And so I kept doing it. That was a month in January, 1995.

For several years as an undergraduate, I met one-on-one with a high school student with serious developmental delays that affected his ability to read and write. He had a normal level of intelligence with a lot of things but with other things he was really far behind and could barely reach a middle school level of performance. I think I did this for three years from fall of 1994 through spring of 1997. Maybe about an hour a week plus some other events with the student and his dad. I'm not sure if this made me more persuaded that teaching was something I could be good at because I usually felt like I wasn't doing the kid very much good. But it did give me experience of a particular kind of teaching.

When I was a freshman in college, the most influential book I read was *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke. High school was a catastrophically bad four years for me. I grew up in Nigeria and started high school in 1989 in Iowa City, Iowa, and was totally alienated and solitary during those years. My freshman year in college, I read this book by a great poet and he talked about the significance of solitude for poets, and I knew I had a lot of experience with solitude. So it just spoke powerfully to me, and it was also beautifully written. So it probably pushed me pretty hard to think of myself as a poet for a long time.