

## **Sowing Hope in Others**

In our lifetime, there may not be too many chances where we meet someone who can be said to really sow hope in us, yet I have been fortunate to encounter such a great human being in my first year of study in the U.S. He offered direct help to me, but a more meaningful truth, he will never be aware of, is that he also planted a seed of hope in me.

The protagonist of the story is Professor Eisenberg, who taught my Community Organization course in the fall of 2012. Over six feet tall, a little humpbacked like many seniors in their seventies, Professor was always wearing a serious expression on his face: such a typical professor image. If by chance you met his deep-set eyes accompanied by thick eye pouches, a sense of reverence or even fear for him might arise in you. To me, a new Asian student inaugurating my graduate study in America, it's not too hard to imagine the panic as I faced such a strict-looking professor. And his first class reassured my bias. He was strict about grading and participation of in-class discussion, in which I felt not at all confident. Besides, his voice sounded so deep that it was hard to catch its rhythm and meaning. How I wished that I could have an amiable professor, just for the sake that I was a new foreign student with language deficiency!

In the following sessions, I was lost most of the time. The course brought up a wide range of social issues in America, and examined tactics adopted by community-based organizations, of which I had insufficient background knowledge. My language issue posed another barrier: although Professor was said to have a sense of black humor, I could hardly capture his American punch lines, even at the giggling of other classmates. Maybe because Professor had detected my

taciturnity in class, he threw questions to me from time to time, despite how I always let the class down with my awkward answers.

Two favorable turns took place during the semester. One happened during the midterm which I scraped through with a grade of 85. Because of his numerous corrections to my ideas and grammar, Professor warned that it was only a charitable grade, seemingly a reverse to his grading principle, and he wished I would be more involved in the course. For the first time, a little sense of reverence for him arose in me. The other favorable turn came about in my in-class presentation, in which I compared a community-based organization's national resource center to the concept of Cloud in IT industry. This vivid metaphor was endorsed by the class with applause, and Professor raised questions to delve into this concept. These two little episodes catalyzed me, from which I knew I was not neglected in the class or by Professor. "You have to believe in yourself" (Sun, 2011 ). I just needed to speak out my ideas without fear.

What ultimately remolded me was what happened in working on my last two papers. They were capstones of the whole course, which required students to compare community-based organizations with regard to their ideologies, tactics, operations, etc., but I had only ambiguous comprehension of many points. This was evidenced by Professor's comments and questions all over my papers; he urged me to redo the two papers. I was amazed at Professor's meticulousness; meanwhile, I felt unprecedented pressure. Professor pinned hope on me to do better, but I was unable to. Soon again, the failure indicated my incapability: Professor was still unsatisfied with both of my redone papers. At that moment, I understood how strict his grading principle was, and what he meant by charitable grade on my midterm paper.

On a late afternoon of the final week of the semester, Professor asked me to visit him. He met with me in the department conference room, saying he wanted to review the papers with me. I was startled for a second at his request, but very soon he treated me and himself with coffee, and dived into the revision of papers. He went over all the remarks with me place by place, explicating them enthusiastically. I gradually gained a sense that he was not only teaching, but also transferring some sort of positive value to me. Like the American politician Brad Henry said, "A good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination, and instill a love of learning" (Henry, 2013). The most impressive part was his elaboration about the concept of democracy, including how democracy was defended by the collective power of the grassroots, how democracy was being jeopardized latently today, and the role non-profit organizations play in promoting democracy. Those topics already surpassed the content of my papers. I noticed his wrinkles quivering while he talked, and his deep insightful eyes flashing a shine of righteousness. Who was he addressing? Only a backward ethnic student. I wondered why he would bother explaining all this to me passionately. But what I could feel, as real as I could touch, was that my impression of him was revised completely. Approximately two hours passed before we realized that darkness had thoroughly descended outside. He urged me to meet with him the next day to continue with the unfinished parts.

I became willing to meet with him gradually, for I felt I liked that positive energy. The second day he continued to exam each nuance of my misunderstanding. Obviously, he had detected my ambiguity in comprehension. The second tutoring session lasted around two hours, but we still did not finish, so Professor asked me to meet with him for the third time.

It was a Friday, the last day of the semester. Professor came to the campus only to help me. Originally he intended to spend three hours with me, but due to his appointment conflict, we

met for one hour and a half. Approaching the end of the meeting, we had a casual talk, from which I learned that he devoted his prime of life in advocating in a community-based non-profit organization. Although he received his Ph. D later, he still preferred to claim himself as an activist. He cherished the time of teaching, and transferred the passion for community advocacy into the teaching by spreading positive value of social justice to his students.

I redid two papers during the winter vacation. Professor reviewed them and gave me a grade of B, only an average passing grade for graduate students. However, I was more than grateful for his enlightenment. Because of him, I increasingly became interested in the concept of a non-profit organization.

In the next semester of spring, 2013, I took another course of his, hoping to let Professor witness my progress. I was much more proactive than the previous semester in preparing for each class and doing each assignment, until one day Professor asked me: “Xingcan, tell me how you made such progress?” I could never forget the exact way he pronounced my name correctly, because he was the only professor who insisted in pronouncing it the way that I pronounced it. He also encouraged me to help another new classmate from my home country, who was in the similar dilemma as I encountered in my first semester.

His passionate teaching and discreet paper revision continued until his last class, right before spring break. It was an unforgettable moment when he only briefly mentioned at the end of the class, that he was diagnosed with a disease, and had to be off for a treatment for months before he would return to campus the next semester. Then he quickly returned to himself and changed to other topics. Without putting cards on the table, many students could sense what the disease was.

In the beginning of Fall 2013 semester, I rushed to the department office, expecting to meet with Professor and share with him my progress – a grade A from his course, but only heard the tragic news: Professor had passed away about one week before then. "Tears are the silent language of grief" (Voltaire, 1824). My tears could not help burst out: my first tears in many years.

Today, I am still inspired by Professor, and will be forever. I asked myself: what elements from Professor inspired me on earth. Now I find my answer: HOPE. Like the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle said, "A strong mind always hopes, and has always cause to hope" (Carlyle, 2013). Once hope is sowed, it won't stop growing. Professor converted his passion for social justice into his commitment to teaching. His respect for me, along with his spirit of commitment and dedication sowed hope in me to explore and fulfill my potential. I have been inspired by him of the concept of a non-profit organization, and now I am taking non-profit management course and have my own initiative to found a non-profit organization in my home country one day.

Hope can be inspiration, passion, or an idea. Hope is like a seed. It can grow, bloom, and flourish. Professor had been sowing the hope of social justice to his students. Martin Luther once said that "everything that is done in the world is done by hope". I believe hope is one of the greatest forces that can impact the world. I believe Professor was a good "sower." And I believe with his inspiration I will also be a sower in the future.

## References

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