

HON 389: The Humanities Center Seminar on Pain
Fall 2008--7:30-10:00 T--CRN 46123--A109
Dr. Nels P. Highberg

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Course Blog: <<http://seminaronpain.blogspot.com/>>

Why Are We Here?

Everyone has felt pain. Even though postmodern and post-structural perspectives teach us to question the concept of "absolutes," "truth," and "objectivity," we cannot deny the universal familiarity we all have with pain. Even though experience with pain can be considered universal, in the moment of the experience, however, one often feels isolated and confused. These feelings often arise because pain is an indescribable, as well as an undesirable, entity. As Elaine Scarry notes in *The Body in Pain*, "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is heard." Various academic disciplines have turned their theoretical lenses towards pain in an attempt to describe the indescribable, a task that proves difficult since pain is so varied. It can be physical, emotional, and/or psychological. For some, pain is a chronic, omnipresent element of daily life, while others take their lack of pain for granted until they are blindsided by it. Pain can also be a personal experience or a communal one, ranging from one person stubbing a toe against a doorframe to an entire city (or country) watching thousands die as towers crash to the ground. This seminar examines pain in all of its guises and through a variety of perspectives, which means we will discuss intense subjects that demand a professional attitude from all of us.

Enrolling in any course provides us with several opportunities, including many that we cannot anticipate when the course begins. I do hope by the end of the course, however, that you will be better adept at a few specific things. More specifically, in this course, we will work:

- To develop a deeper understanding of the ways writers and artists represent personal and communal experiences of pain;
- To raise awareness about how pain can incite political change and social action; and
- To strengthen skills in reading, writing, thinking, and other areas that define both a university education and life in a democratic, pluralistic society.

Essentially, by the end of this course, I want you to be a stronger and more articulate participant in conversations about pain and its effects on individual lives and society at large.

What Will We Be Doing?

To meet these goals, we will be reading different texts, and you will be completing a range of writing assignments. We will be reading the following books, all available at area bookstores and online:

- *Regarding the Pain of Others* by Susan Sontag (ISBN: 0312422199);
- *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation* by Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colon (ISBN: 9780809057399);
- *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, Ethics* by Arthur W. Frank (ISBN: 0226259935);
- *Pain: The Science of Suffering* by Patrick Wall (ISBN 9780231120074); and
- *Push: A Novel* by Sapphire (ISBN: 0679766758).

There are also two other books we'll be discussing. Half of you will read one, and the other half the other:

- *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey through His Son's Addictions* by David Sheff (ISBN: 9780618683352); and
- *Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines* by Nic Sheff (ISBN 9781416913627).

Know that there will also be other readings handed out in class, emailed to you, or available online (through the library's Electronic Reserves, Blackboard, or another website), and at times I may ask you to find your own readings in the library or online.

In addition to reading, you will also be doing a fair amount of writing. You will find out as the course progresses that I am a firm believer that writing is not just something you learn to do but also something that you do to learn. In other words, through writing, you can develop stronger ideas and refine your thinking. Your final course grade will be based on both informal and formal projects that you produce throughout the course.

Blog Postings (25 percent of final grade)

You will create your own blog for this course, and on the days listed on the course schedule, you will create a post for your blog responding to the reading for that day or answering a more specific prompt. Postings must be made before class begins on the days indicated. They should always be substantial (at least a couple of hundred words in length) but can take many forms: asking questions, making connections, and describing reactions. You should also respond to posts written by your colleagues; responses can be written after class and should extend or complicate what they have written. About once a month or so, I will email each of you to let you know how you are doing on these postings and where you are headed in terms of your final grade for this part of the course.

I believe that these activities provide the greatest opportunity to use writing to learn, and they should help you complete your more formal assignments because, ultimately, they provide you with a chance to reflect, struggle, or experiment before receiving a hard and fast final grade.

Reading Quizzes (15 percent of final grade)

Often, when you are reading for a class, it can be difficult to know what to remember, and it can also be difficult for me to ensure that you understand the readings in the ways I intend. To help us both, there will be six (6) quizzes the semester, one on each day that reading is due. These will consist of at least five (5) questions about that day's readings and take place in the first fifteen minutes of class. If you are late to class for any reason and you miss any questions or the entire quiz, you cannot make it up because we will have moved to the discussion of the reading. To determine your final grade on these,

give yourself one point for each correct answer. Then, multiply that total by four (4). That will give you your final grade (94+=A, 90-93=A-, 87-89=B+, 84-86=B, 80-83=B-, etc.). You can miss six total questions, or one full quiz and one question on another, and still earn an A on this assignment; once you miss more than six questions, be aware that your final grade begins to fall precipitously.

Photo Essay (20 percent of final grade)

One of the goals of this class is to look at the way photographers create images of people in pain. We see such images everyday on news sites of people killed in war or suffering from disease. For this assignment, you will annotate images of pain with comments that analyze how they depict the indescribability of pain. I will discuss this assignment, as usual, in much more detail in class, but know now that it is due at the start of class on Tuesday, October 28.

Podcast (15 percent of final grade)

Audio essays, whether from *This American Life* or *This I Believe*, are becoming one of the most popular ways people get information and ideas about the world. You will create one and email it to me in .mp3 format by 6:00 PM on Tuesday, November 25.

Final Essay (25 percent of final grade)

Your final project for this class will be an essay, but one that I think is different than the standard academic essay. For this class, I want you to write a personal essay. This does not mean that you will be required to write about private feelings or experiences but will write about topics the course has raised for you in a more experiential way, which means that you can bring in emotion and passion for your subject differently than you might usually do. I will discuss this essay in much greater detail in class, but know now that it is due through email (in .doc or .rtf format) by noon on Sunday, December 14.

How Will We Be Working Together?

I feel a strong investment in the idea of you finishing this class as a much stronger writer, reader, and thinker than you were on the first day. Therefore, I want to do everything possible to help you learn all you can while we work together. Of course, your academic improvement depends mostly on your efforts and commitment, but I certainly need to do my best to create a space that makes learning possible. If you choose to join me in this endeavor, then there are certain things we should expect from each other.

I expect you to attend every class and complete each reading and writing assignment on time. If we are going to work together, then we have to count on each other to be here both physically and mentally. Sure, we all have the occasional off day, but a noticeable pattern of absences or lack of preparedness affects each of us because it decreases our opportunities to exchange ideas and learn. Therefore, (1) finish all reading, writing, and printing before you arrive to class and have work from other courses put away; (2) arrive on time and plan to be here for the entire session; (3) turn your cell phones off (I will keep track of the time and make sure we end on schedule, so checking the phone's clock is not necessary); and (4) complete all writing assignments

by the stated deadline. Unless the prompt for an assignment says differently, I will not take any formal assignment more than a week late because we will have moved onto other things. Though you have a week to get it to me without a grade penalty, I will not comment on any assignment that is late for any reason, which means you lose a key opportunity to improve as a writer or increase your grade during any revisions (though even in these cases, I will be happy to meet with you in my office to talk about your work). We are not together for that long, and I want to use our time well. Engage fully with everything we do; I will do my best to guarantee that your engagement serves you well in the end.

I expect you to put forth your best efforts for each activity and assignment.

Obviously, you will not learn anything if you do not do the work. When you do it, I hope you really try to do it well. In addition, I intend for much of our work to challenge you, which can feel daunting at times. Even when you feel discouraged or confused, I expect you to trust the process and try to the best of your abilities. That's when learning happens. For any writing assignment, I always expect your work to be your own. *Plagiarism in any form can lead to failing the assignment or the entire course, and it completely robs you of the chance for academic improvement.*

I expect you to communicate with each other and me. Passivity will get you nowhere in life or in this class. I know that not everyone likes to speak in class all the time but I would certainly like everyone to respond to each other's thoughts and the course content occasionally. Often, this will happen through specific in-class activities and questions, and it will sometimes occur online through Blackboard or other digital avenues. By communication, I also mean that I expect you to ask questions constantly about the assignments and your work on them. If you are confused or uncertain about anything, I need to know. Always let me know if you have any concerns about this course or your work in it. It is much easier on everyone if you let me know of any potential problems as soon as they arise. Email me. Come by my office to talk or go over drafts of your assignments. Feel free to add me as a friend on Facebook (I never add students first, but I will accept any friend request initiated by a student). Stay in touch.

You can expect me to offer clear and specific guidelines for each assignment.

I do not want class to feel like a game of "secret basketball" where you are constantly trying to get the ball through the hoop--or in our case, get an assignment done--and the hoop remains invisible, with me only telling you that you're off and need to do it again. I will never tell you what to write for any assignment, but I will be as clear as possible about what I expect the end product to represent and how I think you can get there. This also means that when I grade your essays, I will offer feedback that explains why you received the grade you received, and you can always come to my office and talk with me about your graded essays so that you can better understand why you earned what you earned and how you can improve the next time around. When it comes to the assignment prompts and other course documents such as the syllabus and schedule, know that they will always be available on online throughout the entire course.

You can expect me to have an answer when you ask why any aspect of this class should matter to you. I hate wasting time. I avoid small talk and chitchat if it seems pointless, which it often does. Nothing in this class--the readings, assignments, or activities--will constitute busy work. I will always have a reason for why we are doing anything we are doing, and you always have the right to ask me to provide that reason. You may not always like my answer or agree with it, but I hope you will believe that I have clear, purposeful intentions for everything I ask you to do.

You can expect me to commit to this class with all that I have gained from my experiences as a teacher and my intellectual study as a researcher.

Clearly, I do not want you to coast through this class, and I promise I will not coast as well. I promise to use everything I can from what I have learned as a teacher, writer, and scholar to shape what we do in each individual class session and in the course as a whole. Furthermore, I want you to know that I teach this class because I really do care about the issues we cover in it. I believe that the things we do are not just interesting intellectual exercises but are things that impact our daily, material lives. You can see more about how the ideas I bring up in my classes relate to my everyday life on my blog, <<http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/highberg/blog/>>.

As you work throughout this course and others, do not forget the great resources provided by the university to assist you in your academic endeavors.

Center for Reading and Writing <<http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/crw/main.htm>>: Writing consultants are available for free, one-on-one consultations to go over your writing. They work with writers across the university and at all levels and will speak with you at any stage of the writing process. Stop by (A209) or call (768-4312) for an appointment. Use this service!

Learning Plus <<http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/LDSupport/>>: They offer academic support services to any student who has been diagnosed with a learning disability or attention deficit disorder. They offer individual consultations to assist you with test taking or any other course assignment. Stop by (A209) or call (768-4312) for an appointment.

Counseling and Psychological Services <<http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/CAPS/>>: According to their website, "CAPS' mission is to help students achieve their fullest potential, improve their quality of life, and successfully meet the challenges of college." Also, "CAPS provides a range of short-term counseling and psychological services to the university community. Services are available to full-time students at no additional cost. Part-time undergraduate and graduate students may utilize CAPS services for a nominal fee (students must be enrolled for a minimum of 6 credits). For students, these services may include individual counseling, couples counseling, and group counseling. Counseling services may be ongoing or on a crisis basis." Call 786-4482 or visit GSU 313 to make an appointment.