

## Tiny Zelda

Einstein was wrong. God does, in fact, like to roll dice with the universe. At the quantum level, particles are entangled with one another in time and space, or so we think. Deep beneath the surface, however, the links are not always obvious.

An English professor, for example, can walk into a freshman class one day and wind up saving a life without even realizing it.

It happens more often than we would like to acknowledge, and we are at a loss to explain how or why it happens. Some call it divine intervention, but the physicists like to think of it as "non-local entanglement." Either way, we should recognize that we don't always understand the forces acting on our lives, or the impact we may have on others.

You need a good reason to get up in the morning and hike in -20 degree weather to attend a class. Dr. Zelda Rouillard always made it a worthwhile proposition. After all, where else could a scruffy high school dropout go to find out if he could write? With uncommon grace, she engaged the mind, and held us accountable on the page. She didn't like some of my ideas, and wasn't shy about letting the class know if I was missing the target. Still, she would let us try, if we had the *cojones* to throw it out there. The slackers may have laughed at her, but those of us who could think for ourselves knew the score: if we were up to the task, she would help us to find a voice.

Like most of the complex people we meet, Zelda was a study in contradictions. Underneath the conservative outfits she favored, many of them based on Simplicity patterns from the 1950s and 60s, there lurked a radical. Open to ideas from every literary direction, she managed to sneak Shirley Jackson and Eudora Welty into the curriculum right alongside the classics, and then she would give us that impish smile of hers whenever we managed to connect the dots.

In our papers, we had to write clean -- Zelda was a formidable grammarian -- and we had to make some kind of sense, but we could take chances. She was my first real audience, the first college professor who looked at my work and gave me an honest grade. In a simple and profound way, she restored some of my faith in education. After dropping out of high school, I was convinced the system was utterly corrupt. While it remains the real battleground for class warfare in our time, a college can still have the integrity we need, especially when someone like Zelda supports it over the course of a career.

Going off the deep end, I once wrote a paper for Zelda titled *Contesting Level Zero*: it was about a story by Julio Cortazar (*Blow Up*). It was strange, full of ideas about meta-fiction that added up to something more than their goofy, syncopated parts. To this day, I'm still not sure what it means or why it works. If I hadn't read Borges in my ski-bum-dishwasher-philosopher salad days, I doubt I would have taken it on. When Zelda handed it back to me, she told me she liked it, but wasn't sure what any of it meant. Still, she gave me an A on that paper, and we both had a good laugh about it when I confessed I didn't know what it meant, either. It was one of those moments when you are reminded that the page is the ultimate playing field, and we all have an equal shot to make it, or fall flat on our faces, when we put our words down and share them with others.



The best co-conspirators give you cover. Zelda, who was also my advisor, went along with my diabolical scheme to get a degree in my standard berserk manner. Determined to survive, I put certain courses together and she always gave me the OK. She even went along with my insane desire to take T.C. Johnson's "Symbols" class as an elective in my Junior year: I thought it was a penultimate gesture of confidence (or, perhaps, a sly attempt to convert me to some kind of faith with the help of Eliade and Cassirer, and yes, it worked). Against the odds, and with a lot of help from Madame Rouillard and her peers, including George Sibley, Pat Sterling, John Cope and T.C., I earned a degree in four years. Another life saved, even if she wasn't entirely aware that she was doing it.

After graduating, I left the Gunnison valley for the riches of the big city. I still think about the divine Madame Rouillard almost every day. You see, whenever I put words on the page, there is a "Tiny Zelda" that I keep on my shoulder. This doppelganger gives my inner critic a form and a voice that I have to listen to. I owe it to her. To look at every line at least twice, to strive for clarity, to get each comma and colon and word where it belongs. To make sure the audience can follow each idea to a clear and meaningful conclusion. Even if it does rely on a form of non-local entanglement that only a physicist could love. While I did get the chance to thank her before she left this vale, this is the kind of debt you can only pay forward to the next generation. In other words, the best kind. Zelda ... I promise to do my part, and once again, I thank you.

*Steven Peterson, 2009*

