

Things We Learned from Pat Conroy

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor
Tuesday, 03 October 2017 12:35



The second annual Pat Conroy Literary Festival is



almost upon us, and this year's theme is The Transformative Power of Education. In honor of that rich subject, I asked a random handful of festival presenters to ruminate on "one thing" they learned from Pat Conroy, through his writing or his life. It was a tough assignment; I know, because I made myself do it, too. As the wonderful submissions poured in, I was surprised, but also relieved, to find that nobody chose *my* one thing. Whew!

So I'll get this party started. Pat Conroy taught me that there's something even more transformative than education, and it's the power of grace.

Clearly, I'm not talking about physical grace. Though Pat was once a sleek and elegant athlete, years of hard living had already begun taking their toll when I met him in his late 40s. ("All my friends are dashing and distinguished now," I remember him telling me, "but I'm aging like some hideous crone." This was classic Conroy hyperbole, of course. He was adorable. Just not particularly graceful.)

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I'm talking about grace in the metaphysical, even biblical, sense. An unmerited gift. Unearned favor. Over the 25 years I knew Pat Conroy, I saw him bestow grace on one person after another - from a reader in a book-signing line, to a struggling young writer, to a stranger in the grocery store, to a neighbor in need - and I watched as those people grew strong and blossomed in the light of that grace. In fact, I was one of them.

When I was younger, I believed that those of us in Pat's "circle" had somehow earned our place there - that he had chosen us, had seen something special in us that nobody else did. The older I get, the more I suspect I had that scenario backwards. In reality, I think Pat met people (often by accident), treated us as if we were special (i.e. bestowed his grace), and we, in turn, *became* special. We saw ourselves through his eyes - through Conroy-colored glasses - and we somehow rose to that vision. That's how grace works.

Don't get me wrong. Pat was no angel. He loved to pick a fight, and he could hold a grudge like nobody's business. But never was the transformative power of grace on such bold display as when Pat Conroy forgave. I'm not talking about the everyday, ask-and-offer, two-way forgiveness we all engage in regularly - or should. I'm talking about enormous, super-human forgiveness extended to someone who's hurt you deeply and repeatedly and without remorse - forgiveness that's 100% undeserved and never even asked for. In the latter years of his life, Donald Conroy - *The Great Santini* - was the recipient of that rare forgiveness that can only be called grace. Despite a lifetime of heartache and abuse at the hands of his father, Pat Conroy found reserves of grace he didn't even know he possessed, and began showering that old man with it. He damn near pummeled his dad with grace.

At first, Don Conroy turned away from that fierce, relentless grace. It was too bright, too disorienting. But Pat didn't stop. He sent wave after wave of grace until his father finally dipped his toe in that ocean . . . and then waded in . . . and then changed. The Great Santini actually changed.

In our [last interview together](#), Pat and I talked about this "kinder, gentler Don Conroy" that emerged in late life, and he struggled to put his finger on just what had brought about his father's radical transformation. Pat thought maybe it had something to do with the way he'd portrayed Don in *The Great Santini* ("Dad was determined to prove he wasn't that guy"), or Don's move to the South ("it changes people, makes them friendlier"), or maybe even the shock of losing his wife to divorce.

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I told Pat then, and I still believe, that it was something simpler and more miraculous. I believe Don Conroy was transformed by grace.

-□□ Margaret Evans, Editor, *Lowcountry Weekly*



Daniel Cross Turner, professor and author, *Southern Crossings: Poetry, Memory, and the Transcultural South*

One thing I learned from Pat Conroy: *heart*.

To take heart. To have courage. From the Latin for heart: *cor*. Pat Conroy -□□ through his writing and his living - taught me heart is the core of *courage*

. And heart is also the core of *empathy*

. Heart is the core, the cord - □□ it binds us each to each in empathy. For Pat, life was heartfelt.

I titled my forthcoming review of Catherine Seltzer's excellent *Understanding Pat Conroy: "□□ On Pat Conroy: The Power to Withstand, the Power to Understand."*□□ Heart links both. As Pat knew - □□ and his life and life's work amply illustrated - heart is what gives us the power to

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with

stand

trauma. Heart equally gives us the power to

understand

, to come to apprehend our own suffering more fully by understanding others'. Heart conducts a power of good - to advocate, and to heal.

While the binding of courage/empathy through heart courses through Pat's works, as someone who's devoted twenty years to university teaching, I particularly value the role of heart in *The Water Is Wide* (1972). It took great heart to stand up as a young teacher for the good of African American schoolchildren at that time, for the good of progressive education, great heart to stand with Gullah citizens of South Carolina (many of whom trace roots here back centuries) against fierce institutional prejudices and pressures targeting them. Yet the narrative shows Pat to be open-minded, too. He doesn't puff himself up into the Shining White Knight of Glorious Reform. He's aware of his own failings, his own complicities. The school board may have crucified him - fired him summarily for showing the heart to speak out against others' humiliation and his own - but he knows he's not Jesus. No, not Jesus, but I'll follow him.

Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. Have the heart to be sufficient unto the day.

One thing I learned from Pat Conroy: Live absolutely with an open heart.

Bren McCl



ain, novelist, *One Good Mama Bone*

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Pat Conroy taught me how to behave - not only a writer, but as a human being. Don't they go hand in hand? And I wouldn't have known the magnitude of his impact, if I hadn't experienced the complete antithesis. It happened in Atlanta, GA, during intermission at the world premiere of a play based on a famous novel. The famous novel writer was drying her hands in the restroom, and I told her, "I am enjoying the play." "Don't talk to me," she said with a voice that cut through me like a knife. And then there's Pat Conroy, yes? With his enormous heart that gives his "fans" all the time in the world, casting the light from himself onto them. I know, because I've stood in that light, been warmed by it. This is how I want to conduct myself. As a writer. As a human being. Thank you, sweet Pat.



Bud Ferillo, producer and director, *Corridor of Shame: The Neglect of South Carolina's Rural Schools*

More than anything, Pat was a fighter. That was in his DNA and the source of his inspiration to speak up for children stranded in poverty; against his college that refused to admit women even though it is a public institution; for removing the Confederate flag from the State House dome and legislative chambers; against book censors wherever they raised their ignorant heads. He had a giant capacity for outrage that he loosed on his adversaries, and made us cheer and love him all the more. I will always miss his unique writing and speaking talents but I will never forget his fierce courage that made us comrades.

Valerie Sayers, professor and novelist, *The Powers*

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