

mentor's introduction

Christine Marme' Thompson

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

In the following excerpt from her dissertation, Mary Jane Zander invites us to stand beside her as witnesses to a decisive moment in the shared experience of an art teacher and his students. Quietly, in a manner that alternates between the matter-of-fact and the ceremonious, Steve takes his leave from a school where he has taught for many years and a group of students he has known for far too short a time. It is almost as if Steve allows his students to eavesdrop as he pauses to reflect upon their future, to absorb his concern that the unfinished edges of the work they accomplished together will unravel if he is not there to hold the strands in place, just a bit longer. He leaves them with a tentative assurance that all will be well, an expression of his hope that they have internalized an understanding of art that will resonate within them and protect them from the potentially distorting influences of indifferent or inauthentic teaching. And, then, the class continues, established routines are played out one last time: Life goes on.

We understand this encounter, and readily empathize with those who participated in it, on many levels. Who among us has not cast a wistful backward glance at places and people we were reluctant to leave, for whom we felt responsible in some way, with whom our business was unfinished, our hopes only partially fulfilled? Who has not endured the departure of someone who mattered, who cared, who was a part of our everydayness? As teachers and as human beings, we are touched by the scene Mary Jane recreates; we understand what it must have been like to be that teacher, those students.

And yet, our understanding is, always and inevitably, partial: There are things about this scene that may puzzle each of us, may cause us to consider how we might act and react if we found ourselves in circumstances similar to Steve's or to his students'. As we view this candid shot, we come to realize that, as it reveals the universality of its subjects, it also reveals their uniqueness, their particularity, and their otherness. And it is here, in the differences between us, that phenomenological inquiry begins, in the area just beyond the everydayness we inhabit and take for granted. This is the area where the researcher's search for meaning emerges and constantly returns, where description deepens into research, where Dr. Zander's consideration of conversation as pedagogy originates.