

ONLY HOURS after the Penn State community had learned that its head football coach, Joe Paterno, and its president, Graham B. Spanier, had been fired in connection with a pedophilia scandal, I realized I had to teach. I couldn't spend any more time worrying about how the former football coach, Jerry Sandusky, had been charged with sexually abusing eight boys. I couldn't think any more



TIM FOLEY FOR THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

## Teaching 'The Kite Runner' at Penn State

By SOPHIA A. McCLENNEN

about how he founded a charity (the Second Mile) for disadvantaged boys in 1977, and that it was through that charity that he met his alleged victims. I couldn't spend any more time envisioning a tall and strong Mike McQueary witnessing a boy being sodomized and then walking away. I couldn't think any more about how a possible university cover-up of that alleged assault had cost the two main leaders of our university their jobs.

In the whirlwind of emotions, conversations, and Internet searches of the past week, I had not given much thought to my class, but then it hit me: Today was the day I was supposed to teach *The Kite Runner*.

*The Kite Runner*, by Khaled Hosseini, is a novel about the moral fallout that occurs when a boy fails to protect his friend from a brutal act of sodomy. He watches and does nothing, and his inaction haunts him so severely that he further distances

himself from the victim. The themes of the novel center around how one can recover from making a terrible moral mistake, what defines loyalty and betrayal, and what sorts of sacrifices are necessary for redemption. How can one recover from failing to intervene and protect an innocent? Is the moral failure connected solely to the event, or is the continuing inability to correct it even worse?

The week had already been filled with stranger-than-fiction moments—learning that Sandusky's 2000 memoir was called *Touched*, reading a grand-jury report that made many TV crime-show scripts seem tame, watching thousands of students "riot" in support of Paterno—and now there was *The Kite Runner*.

I teach one of the largest classes at Penn State to deal with human-rights ethics; as far as I know, it's the only one that talks about how stories are told in response to traumatic events. My course, "Human Rights and World Literature," is as much about how stories communicate human-rights abuses as it is about the abuses themselves. Which stories get told? Which get remembered? How can we separate stories that sensationalize from the real need to attend to victims' tragedies? How can we determine if the story makes the victims seem like helpless "others" or gives them dignity?

As you might imagine, it was a very intense class. I decided to let the novel help us frame some of the questions I was sure were on the students' minds. For most of the class, we talked about the protagonist, Amir, and his failure to protect his friend Hassan. We talked about how Amir responded to his mistake and about the idea of redemption. During the last 20 minutes, we moved away from the novel to discuss events taking place on the campus.

Once I opened the floor to comments and questions about how the novel might help us understand what was going on, the students erupted with reactions to the events of the past week. Many were angry, most were shocked, but they were also yearning for guidance on how best to respond. Rather than give them a blueprint for action, I urged them to use the skills they had acquired in class to guide their sense of ethics, their judgment, their responsibility to the community. The students seemed to respond well, especially to my encouraging them to remember that complex problems require complex solutions.

One young woman wrote to me later: "We feel lost and are at odds about how to handle all that is going on, which I imagine is similar to Amir's feelings throughout the book. Making this kind of comparison was very strange because of the timing, but it allowed me to gain a new perspective on the current situation."

We also talked a lot about how this story was being told—in the media and among students, for example—and how students in this class might help reframe that conversation to focus on what they felt were the central issues at stake. So far, the media and student dialogue had

focused mostly on whether the Board of Trustees had made the right decision, who was to blame, and what these events would mean for Penn State's reputation. Very little had been said about the alleged abuse of the children and about what seemed like a culture of secrecy that had turned a blind eye to victim after victim.

My students were angry at media that were painting them as football-loving hoodlums, but what bothered them much more was the fact that someone they had idolized may have made a terrible mistake. And if Joe Paterno could make a mistake, where did that leave them? Part of what was necessary was to help them find a way to recover their own sense of ethics. If they didn't want the media defining them, they would have to narrate their own story.

AND THAT'S what they did. The next night, students organized a candlelight vigil for the victims. The organizers were not in my class, but my students were among the thousands who showed up that evening to hold candles for a moment of silence. Many, many more students were at that vigil than at the riot following the firings.

I hope that my class on human rights has offered my students a chance to engage ethically and philosophically with the issues we are facing now at Penn State. I hope it has given them a moral vocabulary with which to think about these events by applying what they were learning in our readings. Students told me that few faculty were even discussing these issues in class—early in the week, the administration had warned the faculty to be careful in classroom conversations—and that they welcomed the chance to talk. One student noted: "The recent events—that have given our university the worst kind of international attention Penn State has ever seen—could not have occurred at a more relevant time in our course curriculum."

*The Kite Runner* is already a novel that makes me extremely emotional. As an Afghan-American who has to confront the public's general lack of awareness about the situation in Afghanistan, I have often found teaching the book to be hard. I have taught it for the past four years in the hope that my students would, through reading it, acquire some sense of connection to the Afghan fathers, mothers, and children who still live in a state of fear and war. I hoped it would teach them that Afghans face ethical dilemmas every day, and that, just like everyone else, they make mistakes, cover them up, confront them, and, in some cases, try to make amends. I hoped it would help students bridge the distance and feel empathy for a people they barely know. It never occurred to me that I would use the novel to help students feel empathy for children who were harmed on our very own campus.

I always considered *The Kite Runner* a somewhat exaggerated metaphor for moral failure. At least, I used to. ■

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