



*Helen Samuels, Ted, and I -- with camel drivers -- at Gizeh
on New Year's Day, 1950 (back of photo inscription)*

Theodore and Martha Cederberg

By Melinda (Lueth) Bargreen
July 1986

Theodore Cederberg, my high-school English teacher, died last month (June, 1986) at the age of 80. At the moment, he is probably inside the Pearly Gates, wearing his deceptively innocent smile, and pointing out to an embarrassed St. Peter the existence of a comma splice and two dangling participles in the celestial entrance forms.

A lifelong perfectionist who loved good writing the way James Beard loved good food, Cederberg did considerably more than point out usage errors in his 34 years of high-school teaching. In fact, he and his wife Martha, who taught history in an adjoining classroom at Everett High School, did so much more than the fundamentals of their jobs

that the breakup of their long partnership is cause to reflect on the qualities that make great teaching.

Martha is still alive, although the quick mind and the retentive memory that she used to such telling effect have gradually disappeared. She has perhaps the cruelest disease for a historian – Alzheimer’s – and while she has fought furiously against it, nobody wins that particular battle.

But what teachers they both were in their heyday, and how great their influence was! Worldly, intellectual, full of fascinating secrets to impart, the Cederbergs held a sort of salon in their apartment (and, later, in their Edmonds house), which was decorated with French furniture, Meissen china, a European grand piano and a splendid chandelier, which had been lovingly unpacked, crystal by unbroken crystal, after the couple’s post-war sojourn in Vienna.

The walls were full of books and memorabilia, and Martha Cederberg used to recline on her Marie Antoinette chaise longue to receive visiting students. Theodore, a notable pastry chef who liked to dabble in *Gourmet* magazine for inspiration, would appear with a tray of his specialties – sometimes, joy of joys, served on lovely china plates that had a candleholder complete with a lighted candle.

Our class encountered Martha first because she taught junior World History, an impossible class that began in September with the dawn of civilization and galloped through the centuries until we arrived, panting and gasping, at the Cold War in June. This was the middle 1960s, and we girls were wearing short skirts, raccoon rings of eyeliner, teased hair and white lips. But even then, our benighted eyes could recognize a *femme du monde* when they saw one, and Martha Cederberg was the genuine article. In her well-cut tweeds, her dramatic capes and her European suits, she showed us that there was life beyond polyester – and life beyond the age of 30.

Martha’s view of history was unlike any we had seen before: Not a succession of dates and edicts and battles, but a succession of philosophies and styles and memorable people. Even subjects we had thought were forever dead – the boring old Egyptians, for instance – were enlivened with stories of the Egyptians’ passions, hatreds, fears, and hopes, all drawn from her firsthand archaeological experiences in Egypt.

As bait, she used to dangle choice volumes from her personal library of Egyptology in front of us, allowing students to check the volumes out. She made them all sound so enticing that we fought over the possession of texts with titles such as “*Gods, Graves and Scholars.*”

She spoke about Metternich, Mozart, and Maria Theresa as if they were lifelong friends who might drop in to tea at any moment. She read aloud from Napoleon’s sexy letters to

Josephine and from the wicked correspondence of the Borgias; she showed slides of Francis I and Nefertiti.

Nobody got out of her World History class without being able to recognize an Ionian column or a Louis XV chair or Albrecht Dürer's signature – or how to read elementary hieroglyphics. We learned why there were effigies of Norse gods on early Christian churches in Scandinavia, and how peculiarly golden the sunshine looks at the Parthenon. Martha Cederberg was the kind of teacher who would crawl under her desk if the classroom got particularly noisy, and who once, during our Egyptian studies, came to class wrapped in layers of sheeting. Nobody ever quite knew what she would do next. Theodore was dignified, tweedy, professorial and urbane. He terrified students with his devastating irony until they saw through to the essential kindness beneath. From him, not surprisingly, we learned to appreciate levels of irony and satire in literature.

But most of all, we learned that the kinds of facile bluffing with which we had puffed our way through previous writing classes were not going to work here. No one could detect and deflate puffery more swiftly than Theodore Cederberg.

A fiercely independent thinker and a lifelong liberal, he taught us to probe beneath surface assumptions and to apply the rules of logic. He was never afraid to direct a few thrusts at our school administration whenever pompous or repressive judgments were handed down (which was fairly frequently).

When we look back on the past, it's common to glorify the old days simply because they're a part of lost youth. Nonetheless, I'm convinced that the mid-'60s really were a sort of golden era in public education: post-Sputnik and pre-Vietnam, when the reins were still firmly in the hands of the teachers. We students griped and grumbled, but we respected our teachers and worked hard to please them.

What is astonishing, in retrospect, is that in a modest-sized, modest-income community like Everett there could be such widespread excellence in teaching. The Cederbergs were not alone. There was Denzil Walters, an extraordinarily gifted writer/teacher who challenged students more perceptively than most of my later graduate-school professors; there was the astute Gerald Sustad, who eloquently led our progress through Chaucer and Milton; there was the razor-sharp Craig MacLennan, who ran U.S. History classes with a military discipline that always got results.

Most of all, these teachers opened up our vistas.

"I know you will go to Europe someday and see all these things for yourselves," Martha Cederberg used to tell her classes, the sons and daughters of millworkers, homemakers and lumbermen. When we did, we thought of her at Versailles, at Westminster Abbey, at the Kunsthistorisches Museum.

The Cederbergs never had children, although they wanted them. Instead of adopting, they adopted classroom after classroom of us, with lasting results. And that is why they will never die: Their legacy lives on in the hundreds whose intellectual enthusiasm caught fire from the flames that burned so brightly in both of them.

(Adapted from *Reflections on Influential Teachers* by Melinda Bargreen,
http://www.melindabargreen.com/Melinda_Bargreen/On_Great_Teaching.html)