

Diversity Statement: Spencer Todd Bennington

πλάσμα—*plasma*, something molded

ἀφαίρεσις—*apheresis*, taking away

Plasmapheresis is the process by which blood is siphoned from the body, spun in a centrifuge machine to separate the constituent parts, and plasma is harvested while the denser red blood cells are pumped back into the body. From the Greek, this is a process by which something molded, something made, is taken. But, in my hometown, if you're "donating" plasma, it means you're *giving away* a part of yourself. Why? To chase an angry fix? Because that check hasn't come in the mail? Or, maybe, you're a little light on cash after paying college application fees.

It's easy to get lost in the dark space between *sale* and *sacrifice*.

As a first-generation college student, one who has always funded his own education, I'm no stranger to offering up something of value (my time, my talents, my *body*) for something I deem more important--like an opportunity for a different life. In this way, I might not fit the traditional academic mold, but it's exactly for this reason that I better empathize with the diverse student populations who struggle to find a way to stay in my classes.

I feel blessed to not teach in large lecture halls because of the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with students. But, with that privilege comes a moral responsibility--as one of the few professors my students can converse with freely, I place great importance on developing an open, safe line of communication. This often means inviting uncomfortable questions and giving honest answers: *Yes, I was temporarily homeless. Yes, I have used SNAP to purchase my family's Thanksgiving the year they could barely make rent.* Because, with the growing numbers of food or housing insecure college students, it's important to remember that while many attend class seeking our content knowledge, many others simply need our *help*.

My research in embodiment and my own experiences teaching have shown me that I'll never truly understand all the sacrifices my students make, but that I will always have the ability to listen. That's about all I could offer when Logan, a freshman, confided in me that he'd spent Christmas in rehab because of a heroin relapse. Suddenly, my job to teach him how to craft a thesis-driven argument paled in comparison to the necessity of assisting in his recovery. I gave my time, my talents, and my ear when I agreed to be his sponsor instead of just his teacher. And throughout the semester, when he'd call me at 3:00 a.m. to tell me how his skin was crawling, how all he could think about was using again, to cry...I realized that true embodied empathy goes beyond the kinds of sensations I'll ever know how to feel.

While Logan battled the shakes of withdrawals, students like David combatted tremors from PTSD, and others still the trembling rage and paranoia accompanying sexual trauma, all in the desks of my writing classroom. Somehow, as an adjunct with a full teaching load, one who taught martial arts in the evenings and delivered pizzas on weekends to make ends meet, I was supposed to teach them rhetorical theory AND how to survive, to heal...to transform?

That's when it hit me. It didn't matter how we were different, how my experiences with hardship contrasted with their own messy, complex lives. What mattered was how we were all similar, how we all made the choice to donate our time, our talents, our *bodies* for something we found to be even more valuable--a chance at a better life, for ourselves or for those we hoped to inspire. I didn't have to give them anything extra, because I already offered the most important parts of myself. And in so doing, I gave them hope that whatever it was they were sacrificing might lead to something they value and desire even more. Something that no one can take from them, something that only they have the power to *give*.