LOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING

Larry Fritzsche
Mathematics/Theology
Sayville High School, Sayville, NY

[Assignment: Describe a person, place or thing that has exceptional meaning for you.]

From first appearance, Miss Buckmaster seemed like a tough, cold-hearted woman whom students wouldn't want anything to do with. She always moved quickly and sternly through the halls with a key ring in one hand and a water bottle in the other. However, when she was in the classroom, she was a funny teacher who could easily identify with students. Her lectures were not cruel, as one would expect, but quite the opposite. Miss Buckmaster reached out and touched her students. In particular, she changed my life in a very special way, not only as a teacher, but also as a friend.

Despite her stringent, almost grave, scholarly look, Miss Buck, as her students called her, kept a sense of humor in all situations. One day, during one of her lectures, a yellow jacket was buzzing around the classroom. Once she saw it, her almost childish instinct took control, and she could not help but go after it. She picked up a textbook and went in hot pursuit of her little adversary. To the entertainment of her students, who were on the edges of their seats watching her, she had trapped it on a window in the corner of the room. With one fell swoop, she slammed the book against the window to kill the yellow jacket. To her dismay, not only was the yellow jacket's life terminated, but also the window's; she had put the book straight through the first floor window. An almost funeral-like silence fell over the room because none of the students knew how to respond. Miss Buck then turned to the class and gleefully exclaimed, "Well, I guess I got it!" Everyone in the room began hysterically laughing as she continued by saying, "Not a word of this leaves the classroom!" It was always important to have at least one teacher whom we could always count on to give us a good laugh. She taught me to keep a sense of humor at all times, in every situation.

Aside from biology, I learned many other things from Miss Buckmaster. One thing she tried to instill in all of her students was a love, or at least a sense of appreciation, for nature and all of God's wonders. She would keep a box in the back of the room for "recyclable paper." When she turned back homework assignments, she would re-collect them from anyone who didn't want to keep them, and put them in a box. If she was at her desk and saw someone throw paper into the garbage, she would stop that person and tell him or her to put it in the box. She would then, on weekends, bring all of the papers she collected to the recycling plant at Stonybrook University to be recycled. By doing this entirely on her own, she reminded us that at times we needed to take the initiative to do the right thing. She also demonstrated to us that sometimes it requires extra effort to do these things, even though no direct reward was offered. These ideas remain with me even today.

There were days in Sayville High School when I was in a really bad mood, either because I hadn't finished my math homework yet, or because I didn't get the grade I wanted on my Spanish quiz, or for any of a number of other reasons. On those days everyone in the halls seemed to look like "the enemy." It was almost as if I wanted them to share in my misery, as a
sort of revenge for whatever got me in this mood in the first place. I would try not to look at my
teachers and friends, in the hopes that they too would ignore me. This strategy worked most of
the time. People grudgingly went by and did their own thing, expecting to receive a friendly
"hello," which they didn't get. However, when Miss Buck came by, she made it a special point
to say hello, and to ask how I was doing. Being as frank as I am, I would always answer with a
phrase such as "crappy" or "not so hot." She would then stop and talk to me about what was
wrong. She would offer words of consolation or advice as necessary. I found that after talking to
her, I would forget about whatever was bothering me and go on with my life. It wasn't that no
one else could have made me feel this way, but Miss Buck made a point of doing it when others
didn't. It was this kind of caring and concern that stuck with me and gave me an example to live
by.

The cliché "don't judge a book by the cover" has been absolutely true regarding Miss
Buckmaster. Despite her intimidating appearance, she turned out to be a sensitive and caring
individual. She touched me and changed my way of looking at the world. She made me change my
outlook on many aspects of my life, and I owe a lot to her.