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LESSON IN SELF-EDUCATION

"Identify these quotations from *Hamlet*," read the instructions. My stomach tightened my palms sweat. "Calm down. This is only a test," I reassured myself. I was in English class surrounded by twenty grim-faced students who were busily pouring ink onto their papers while I watched the tree through the window grow and the hands on the wall clock tick-tock.

My eyes raced down the page. "Hamlet said this to Ophelia during the 'Nunnery Scene' . . ." I thought to myself. I knew the answers, at least some of them. But time was fading and my classmates' heads continued to sag and the tree continued to grow into the sun. I began to identify and explain one of the quotes before I stopped myself. "You could write a great poem on this moment. Taking a test. Watching robots suffer to achieve. Seeing the sun shine on the carpeting unnoticed. Not wanting to explain what I know. Wanting to write . . ." So I did.

"Carpe diem," explained my English teacher in a previous class, "means to seize the moment." so I did. I turned over the test and wrote a poem about Hamlet, me, the tree, the clock, and why I felt the urge to write a poem on the back of my test.

"This can't be your test," my usually placid English teacher said in an unusually harsh voice as I handed the test to him. "No, that's it," I replied, trying to repress a grin.

My teacher called each of us to his desk about a week later to tell us our grades. "I already know what I got," I said to him. He smiled ear to ear and said, "I have no doubt that you do." "Well, did you at least enjoy my poem?" I queried. "Yes," he replied. I explained why I wrote it and why I felt that it was a legitimate reason to leave a test blank. "I felt that it was something I had to do, something I had to prove," I explained. He agreed halfheartedly with my excuse. "But," he argued, "you should be able to write poems *and* take tests." I knew he was right, but at that moment something inside me seemed to laugh at life and although no one appeared to notice, my eyes seemed brighter, my cheeks seemed rosier, and I seemed to strut proudly through the halls the rest of the day.

I only regret that my teacher lost our exams before he could hand them back to us. I keep thinking that someone at this moment may have my Hamlet exam with an "F" on the top and a limited edition poem of mine on the back.

NOTE: This essay was written in response to a question asking my views on active learning and risk-taking in education.