

## St. Joe

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Whether he is teaching English Lit. 2, creative writing, or poetry, those who know him all say the same thing: Northeastern's Joseph DeRoche has a passion for poetry and teaching, a highly approachable personality, and the ability to bring out the best in his students.

Mr. DeRoche, 58, has been a member of Northeastern's English Department for over 30 years. He is a bespectacled, courtly man with a warm demeanor and quick, dry wit who loves the turn of an elegant phrase and the idea of opening young minds to the wonders of great literature. Yet Joseph DeRoche came to teaching "by accident," he says.

"As a young man, I really didn't know what I wanted to do," recalls DeRoche. "I was a History major as an undergraduate at Northeastern, and I decided to take an elective class in poetry. Well, one day, the Professor recited "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," by Dylan Thomas, and I was just -- *floored*. I switched my major to English and started to write poetry."

After his graduation in 1961, DeRoche thought he might become a librarian and took a job at the Boston Public Library, enrolling in an evening course to learn the needed skills, but some fateful words from the instructor -- "let's face it, as librarians, we're all failures" -- convinced him to pursue writing instead. DeRoche approached the established Boston-area poet George Starbuck with some of his poems, who liked them so much he gave them to celebrated "confessional" poet Anne Sexton.

"Dear Joe," Sexton wrote DeRoche in 1961, "I have just read your two sestina's (a kind of poem) -- and I must write to you. I have always suspected it, but you have real talent and imagination. Don't lose this! If you keep going, learning this craft, without losing the originality, you will become a great poet -- I am sure of this. Please don't stop writing. Please don't stop feeling and becoming. ..." Both Starbuck and Sexton encouraged DeRoche to continue writing, and in 1963, with Sexton providing a letter of recommendation, he was admitted as a Writing Fellow at the University of Iowa. It was there that DeRoche got his first taste of teaching. Two years later, he returned to Boston and accepted a teaching position at Northeastern, becoming, in his words, "a hyphenated person -- poet-teacher, teacher-poet."

To Joe DeRoche, teaching is "the transfer of a body of knowledge and a way of thinking that will, in some small way, help students build a valuable life for themselves. ... And I don't think that's grandiose; in a classroom situation, most students see you as an instructor, and that's all you'll ever be. But for some, you're allowed to become their teacher, and it becomes a relationship." Even so, DeRoche continues, "I'm not interested in foisting my values or opinions

on students. Teaching is *discourse* -- a dialogue, not a monologue. I want students to question their assumptions, and I want them to question mine, as well."

English major Mark Michaud, who is currently taking Creative Writing with Mr. DeRoche, says that as a teacher, DeRoche possesses a "special ability to draw out the best in students of different ability. He creates a level of comfort, particularly in a class like creative writing, where people can feel safe discussing their work, which isn't always easy. He helps you develop your 'voice' as a writer, and he does it in a way that's constructive and encouraging."

Senior Jason Miranda, another English major and poet, has had several classes with DeRoche. "Every lecture, every class with him is like a good poem. There's a deliberate sense of structure, an aesthetic quality to the way Joe DeRoche teaches. He has such a deep love and respect for all literature, particularly poetry, and it really carries over in class. But Joe is not a polemical teacher; he doesn't tell you how to write. He certainly offers criticism when he thinks it's necessary, but mainly he's a catalyst. Mr. DeRoche treats students as equals, and that's rare."

An excerpt from one of Joe DeRoche's poems, "The Source," is highly illustrative of his feelings about teaching:

Not to have known you now would be the loss

Once there was a blank where you are standing now.

One moment you were absent, now a source.

To see your face, your walk, becomes a force

To reckon with. Today the shock is how

Not to have known you would have meant a loss.

What do I call the point before our lives have crossed?

A null? Before you came I did not know

The moment of your absence or your source. ..

You're not, I know, a two-faced coin I toss.

You have, of course, two sides to touch. To grow

To know you. That creates the source of loss.

Your absence felt, once felt, makes up the source.

On an early spring day two years ago, DeRoche brought "The Source" to his Introduction to Poetry class and read it for students, taking the opportunity to explain the particular form of the poem, which is called a villanelle. Later that period, DeRoche produced a music box and placed it carefully on the desk in front of him. Students craned their necks forward as he opened it, and were delighted when a tiny, extremely delicate mechanical bird began to sing a plaintive but strangely uplifting song. "This bird reminds me of you," DeRoche said. "You're 'The Source,' little birds. It's spring, so at the risk of spouting a cliché, get out there and fly."

Kevin Gallagher had just one class with Joe DeRoche over ten years ago, but remains a friend. He was a Biology major then, and credits his former teacher with giving him the confidence to write his own poetry. Today, Gallagher is a research assistant at Tufts University during the work week, and editor of his own literary magazine, *Compost*, in his off-hours.

Cindy Bradley, an English teacher and academic advisor at Northeastern who has known DeRoche since 1986, says that she still has vivid memories of a class he taught on the American writer Flannery O'Connor, whose work strongly emphasized her devoutly Catholic religious beliefs. "It was a huge class, about 50 people, but Joe brought such insight into O'Connor's work because he himself is a deeply spiritual person."

Bradley's comments do not surprise David Tutein, who has shared an office with DeRoche for over 23 years, and known him since their undergraduate days at Northeastern. Tutein believes that the powerful sense of faith DeRoche has maintained all his life allows him to connect with students who feel alienated from other teachers. "There are students who have a very, very difficult time relating to their instructors. But Joe is an accepting and loving person, and that comes from his spirituality, I think. He's able to deal with a lot of people on that level."

It was the time DeRoche spent from his mid-20s to mid-30s in the Franciscan Catholic order as a "lay Franciscan" (a member of the order who continues to live and work outside of a monastery) that DeRoche believes shaped his world view in important respects. "The Franciscans taught me respect for human dignity and to treat others as your equal, even your better. I learned to place a strong emphasis on personal service, and that people are not a nuisance, but a necessity." DeRoche left the order after a "crisis of conscience," in which he felt that some of its restrictive doctrine "got in the way of my intellectual curiosity." As he puts it in the last lines of "For Christ In His Triumphant Majesty,"

Yesterday, the sunlight shone

In the middle of the ice

Hanging from the scraggly bushes

At the living room window  
Where the two cats keep looking,  
For Christ knows anything  
That moves is proper game, and gives  
Up today the living spark  
In the guts of winter which means  
Christ, you are alive, have  
To be if the ice shines like fire  
Yet...

Still, says DeRoche, "I never forgot the lessons I learned from the Franciscans." "I rejected the letter, but not the spirit, of Franciscan law."

When he isn't teaching at NU, DeRoche is a "postal analyst" (involving, essentially, crunching numbers) for Warren, Gorham and Lamonte, a publishing house that distributes economic and legal texts. He has published a volume of poetry, *The Inhabited Scroll*, had his work featured in *The North American Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Wave*, and *Yankee Magazine*, and has edited all five editions of the "*Heath Introduction to Poetry*." In addition, he contributes regularly to (and helped found) Northeastern's semi-annual literary journal, the *Spectrum*, which features writing and artwork by students and faculty members. Mr. DeRoche gives frequent poetry readings at the Curry Student Center, facilitates a workshop for professional writers, and can also be found at the various open-mic "poetry slams" in and around Boston.

Musing about the "accident" that led him to a life-long love affair with both poetry and teaching, Joseph DeRoche seems mildly amazed. "You know, I hadn't thought about it this way, but I've found a way to surround myself with poetry. I've *lived* poetry, in one way or another. It was something I loved, and I followed it toward something I *grew* to love." DeRoche pauses a moment. "And, as sometimes happens," he says at last, smiling at the understatement of his words, "it all worked out."