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## There's No Such Thing as Too Much of Jason Sheehan's "There's No Such Thing As Too Much Barbecue": A Pedagogical Discussion

I teach Advanced Placement Language & Composition at Millard West, a large, homogenous suburban high school. Of the roughly 2,300 students enrolled, fewer than 0.2% identify as English Language Learners and only 9% receive free-and-reduced lunch services. Even in our white-flight, affluent district (where district-wide only 3% of students identify as ELL and 23% of students receive reduced-cost meals) my high school is the “white-flightiest” of the four. 96% of West’s students graduate and 85% of them go on to college. AP Language & Composition is among the most popular AP courses in the building: roughly 150-200 (a quarter to a third) of the junior class—and a handful of seniors—enrolls. In order to be eligible for enrollment students must have passed (D or better) Honors English classes in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, or finished the standard English pathway in grades 9 – 11.

I would like to believe my natural charm and studied pedagogical approach account for the class’s popularity. This might have something to do with enrollment, but the reality is that many of my students inhabit a world filled with myriad fears: competing for spots at elite universities and in honors programs at regional schools, scrabbling for scholarship dollars, earning as many dual-enrollment credits as possible to avoid paying college tuition for a full four years, and struggling to get A’s in their AP classes so they can earn weighted GPA’s in the 4.9’s.

For a handful of my students, AP Lang represents the only AP class on their transcript; they know the skills they learn in the course will benefit them regardless of their college major. Some hope to score

high enough on the Advanced Placement exam to have schools waive 3 English credits when they enroll in college. Some want to learn to “write better” so their scholarship and application essays move a few submissions higher in the reviewers’ rankings. However, for most the course is one of six or seven AP classes filling their transcripts and many of these classes are tied to dual enrollment credit through the University of Nebraska, Omaha. The vast majority of my students are academically ready—or more ready than I was—for college-level work, but they still need high school-level encouragement and support. The number of students who despair when their first essays fall below an A on the rubric (for most students, below a B) increases every year. I don’t “grade” the first essay—I simply score it using the standards I use for their final essays—a pedagogical approach I find useful: *here’s where you are as a writer; here’s where you need to be; let’s get there together*. Unfortunately, for many students in my class, the shock of not being naturally good at English—or a school in general—and finding they have a lot to learn creates enough emotional distress that I budget a full day near the beginning of each term to soothe and encourage students who—though bright, engaged, and hard-working—fear they will never be good enough. Granted, my students’ fears arise from the psychological, rather than the basic, layers of Maslow’s hierarchy—but because my students struggle with a sense of belonging and a sense of esteem, teaching the personal essay presents classroom challenges.

Millard West High School operates on a 4 x 4 block schedule, with a full 18-week fall and 18-week spring term. Classes meet every day. Though some classes run for only 9 weeks and students’ schedules change a bit at the mid-term—students enrolled in 18-week classes remain in the same section for the duration of the course. This schedule offers some advantages—each class is roughly 90 minutes long, so we have time for instruction, practice, and feedback. We can have lengthy and involved class discussions. I can schedule writing workshops where writers in groups of four have 20 minutes a piece to focus on each member’s writing. And, as a teacher, I have only 3 classes a day—unlike the 5 or 6 most teachers on a traditional schedule must handle. However, 4 x 4 block poses real problems as well. The first is having

enough time for reading student work and providing meaningful feedback. If I have three full writing sections (I teach Creative Writing too), I have 60 – 90 students who need instruction and guidance on assignments that are due in a matter of days, not weeks. The second is the lack of alignment between my district’s calendar—which runs from the second week of August to Memorial Day—and the Advanced Placement National Exam, which routinely schedules exams the first and second weeks of May. This means, for students enrolled in AP Language & Composition—all the instruction, practice, and feedback on the Rhet/Comp elements of the course need to be finished by the middle of April.

When I first started teaching Advanced Placement Language and Composition, I began with personal essays. We spent about three weeks on narrative writing, then broadened out to more diverse personal and familiar essays. Most of my district’s English curriculum in Honors 9 and 10 and English 9 – 11 focuses on literature study. English 11 has a mandatory “research paper” that requires citation—but for most classes this a perfunctory exhibition. English 11 and Honors 10 do a bit of argumentative writing organized around the ACT writing prompt—but my building’s English curriculum is a reading/literature-focused one. Originally, I thought that by focusing on narrative and personal essays (which draw more directly on literary approaches than arguments) I could help bridge the way between fiction and nonfiction by exploring diction and syntax, tone, and language elements before including more specifically argumentative moves. This approach struggled. My academically and intellectually ambitious, but insecure and anxious students, held back from one another—both in their willingness to write about what mattered to them and in their willingness to engage in constructive workshops. This approach also pushed critical skills necessary for success on the AP national exam into a narrow window for students enrolled in the spring term.

So, after taking more Rhet/Comp courses myself, and getting involved with the National Writing Project, the Nebraska Writing Project, and developing an appreciation for place-based argument, I reorganized the course. Because my students have the least experience with, and exposure to, Rhet/Comp-

style reading and writing, I take them through a full semester of conventional essay writing: editorials, arguments of position, and arguments of action. This approach helps my students engage in writing and with one another. Place-based arguments such as proposing the district ban plastic water bottles, or caffeinated beverages, or install EV charging stations in the parking lots gives students permission to reveal what they care about and makes them more open to receiving feedback and discussing their writing projects because the writers want to persuade a clear audience about a real issue. After spending nine weeks exploring traditional arguments, the same roster of students returns and we transition into working on more personal writing: narratives, philosophies, and cultural criticisms and observations. That is why, in the third week of the second semester of AP Language and Composition, we explore Jason Sheehan's "There's No Such Thing As Too Much Barbecue."

Sheehan's essay appeared in the reboot of the This I Believe Project, which originated in 1951 when broadcaster Edward R. Murrow invited Americans, famous and unknown, to read four- to five-minute essays about their personal philosophies. This I Believe and NPR revisited the format in the late 2000's. NPR aired the essays during their morning and afternoon drive-time news broadcast programs: *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered*. The format—a ~500 word essay the writer can read aloud in three to five minutes—presents a significant and worthy writing challenge. Using only affirmatives (a This I Believe essay may discuss a writer's journey from one belief system to another but it may not attack or criticize others' beliefs) the writer must find a way to share a fundamental and meaningful belief using concrete examples and personal anecdotes. I introduce my students to a half-dozen or so of these essays and encourage them to browse the *This I Believe on NPR* website to find more. Students can find essays by celebrities like Tony Hawk, Muhammad Ali, and Wayne Coyne; and notable writers and thinkers like Amy Tan, Luis Urrea, and Margaret Mead. The essays aired on NPR—whether by professional writers or amateurs—offer a lot of ways “in” to a personal essay. The This I Believe project's own website: [thisibelieve.org](http://thisibelieve.org), offers even more essays, many of them written by student writers. Most provide a number

of “point and name” opportunities to help teach writers how to find their voices, from Sarah Adams’s “Be Cool to the Pizza Dude” (which offers a clear organizational model rooted in individual micro-essays) to Jamaica Richter’s “There’s More to Life Than My Life” (which includes epiphany and non-linear narrative.) Most This I Believe essays also revolve around trauma, reconciliation, and pain. Prior to teaching Sheehan’s essay, I offer my students Frank Miller’s “That Old Piece of Cloth,” Azir Nafisi’s “Mysterious Connections that Tie Us Together,” and Jon Carroll’s “Failure is a Good Thing.” My students confront the horror of 9-11, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the reality and necessity of failure. These essays all follow a full 9-weeks of my students exploring what is “wrong” with the world they inhabit and making arguments to improve it. Though the discussions we have about these essays—and the responsibility we have to engage at or local level to help build the society we want to live in—energize us, I admit that most of the content of my course is a bit of a downer.

I choose Sheehan’s essay about barbecue because his use of allusions, examples, and concrete language let me discuss word choice. I choose his essay because the musicality of his parallel structures, purposeful violations of grammar conventions, and rhythmic and phonic devices let me point out voice and style. I teach Sheehan’s essay about a belief in barbecue because it completes the top-row requirements for the personal essay assignment in my class and it provides students with an accessible model they might emulate in their own writing. But, these reasons also apply to the other handful of essays I offer my students.

The real reason I teach “There is No Such Thing As Too Much Barbecue” is because of its impossible optimism, that it—despite Sheehan’s introductory assertion he will avoid writing about serious topics like “world peace or the search for meaning in an increasingly distracted world or anything...grave and serious”—manages to address a significant belief in fewer than 600 words. His essay violates the expectations of the form while fulfilling the spirit of the genre.

I live 45 minutes away from the high school where I teach—and every day in the late 2000s, as I listed to *Morning Edition* on the way to work and *All Things Considered* on the way home, Jay Allison would interrupt a news broadcast inevitably full of stories about political corruption, environmental disaster, financial instability, international conflict, and refugee resettlement with a curated personal essay that arose from these tragedies and this suffering. I enjoyed the intimacy of the writers’ language and the way personal essays provoked thought about larger contexts, but I found myself more often on the verge of tears than on the verge of laughter at the end of the five-minute segment.

I tuned in to NPR on my way to work on the Friday morning before the Memorial Day Holiday in 2008 or 2009. Due to unusual snow-fall in January and March of the previous winter and spring, the school year had been extended past Memorial Day and into early June. Though a holiday weekend loomed ahead of me and the bulk of my courses had met their necessary milestones, I still had a few days of instruction remaining before the final projects in my writing classes (final essays, portfolios, end-of-term reflection letters, etc.) came in. I had a lot of grading on my plate and my students and I were a bit surly about the extended school year. That morning NPR rebroadcast “There’s No Such Thing...” (originally aired the Monday of Memorial Day: May 29, 2006) and my mood brightened.

Sheehan’s essay is a celebration—not only of barbecue—but of the human condition. He understands his audience expects a story of trauma, of overcoming, of wrestling with personal demons or hostile family dynamics. He promises us an essay without anything that “serious.” His essay is rooted in affirmation, a continuously positive relationship with food and the people who make it. His essay does what Sheehan argues good barbecue does: “[exist] without gimmickry, without...infernal swindles and capering.” He writes concretely about abstractions, he writes minutely about big ideas, he writes sincerely about what matters most to him. And if we can teach our students to write essays that speak their truths in similar ways, we will have cultivated excellent writers. If we teach our students to think about the world and their relationship with it the way Sheehan does, we will have cultivated good human beings. If we take

the time to realize that some of our most important beliefs arise from joy—not pain—we will all be better off.

### **Introducing the Introduction**

I assign the essay as overnight homework and ask the students to come prepared with observations and questions for discussion. They rarely give any attention to Sheehan's introduction: "After listening to this project for several weeks, I knew I could do three minutes too. Certainly not on world peace or the search for meaning in an increasingly distracted world or anything as grave and serious as all that, but on a belief just as true." When I ask them to look at it again and describe its relationship to the rest of the essay, most settle on something glib—it introduces the subject. At this point early in the second semester of the course, the students remain tightly focused on argumentative introductions. I generally teach my students to write short introductions for their arguments: to establish their exigence and then establish their position. We explore nuance, audience, and moderate language—but, with a few exceptions, we study and write essays that present a clear thesis in the first two or three sentences.

My student population is good at "playing school." For the most part, they want high marks and will use whatever formulas or strategies teachers provide to achieve them. Many of my students have difficulty abandoning the sentence stems I offer them as ways to introduce evidence or counter opposing views in arguments. They are reluctant to experiment in their own writing. They certainly have trouble recognizing good writing when it does not align with the structures I have exposed them to in my class. Their reliance on existing models is useful in the argument unit—especially when preparing them for the AP Lang national exam timed-essays. But their reluctance to realize there are many ways to successfully approach writing inhibits not only their own writing, but their ability to appreciate the value in an unfamiliar approach.

While my students' response to the function of Sheehan's introduction isn't wrong, I point out he doesn't name his specific and concrete subject until the second paragraph which begins "I believe in barbecue." The first paragraph instead introduces what the essay will *not* be about. Sheehan establishes his exigence with his audience by sharing his audience's identity; he (like the bulk of the listeners to *All Things Considered*) has "listen[ed] to the results of this project for several weeks" and suggests that it's time for the broadcast to step away from the "grave and serious" for a moment. No one is quite ready for the Memorial Day holiday to end. No one wants to think about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina or living with PTSD on the unofficial first day of summer. So, Sheehan offers an approach to opening an essay most of my students have not confronted yet in their readings, nor one they have attempted in their own writing: identify *with* the audience, "After listening...for several weeks," rather than present the speaker-self as an authority; play down the significance of the topic, "anything as grave and serious as all that," rather than dramatize its importance. This strategy lures readers into a relaxed space where the essay can do its work.

### **Abstract Beliefs, Concrete Worlds**

The first sentence of the second paragraph: "I believe in barbecue," troubles my students. The vegans and vegetarians among them turn their noses up. (I save a discussion about the possibility of non-animal products fitting under Sheehan's broad understanding of barbecue for later.) Others don't understand what he means. Beliefs, to most of my students, involve ideas, not things. The first term of the AP Language course does a good job of clarifying the difference between an opinion (a valid claim achieved by the logical application of evidence and reason earned through study, personal experience, and research) and attitude (a feeling espoused in claim language but untethered from valid evidence and logic). But because I teach in a public school, and because I am much more concerned with "how" my students express their beliefs than "what" my students believe, we do not give much attention to belief before the second



semester of the class. Early drafts of students' personal essays attempt to explore abstractions through other abstractions and generalizations. A student whose argumentative writing demonstrated significant evidence of conservative and libertarian lines of reasoning once attempted an "I Believe in Opportunity" This I Believe Essay. The essay offered no personal examples from the student's life or experiences and instead focused on a discussion of "people." What should have been a personal essay—one revealing how opportunity informed his world view—offered an argument that vaguely referenced free will and probability. In a conversation with the student I asked him if he could go snowboarding after school. (Nebraska is a flat state.) He said no. I asked if that limited his belief in "opportunity," if the circumstances of his birth, his dependence on his parents, and the environment in which lived limited his opportunity to readily go snowboarding relative to young people living in Colorado or Wyoming. It took a while, but eventually the student realized "opportunity" was too big an abstraction for him to explore in 600 words and that he didn't have enough personal experience to demonstrate how that belief shaped or impacted his life. Eventually he wrote an essay about swinging for the fences whenever he was at bat—whether his coach wanted him to or not. That became a memorable essay about confidence, defiance, and deciding whether or not he played baseball to make others happy or himself happy.

Other students, particularly for those with important ties to a faith community, try to write theological essays defending particular dogma. There are a few free churches in the district with large youth involvement and a sort of "witness testimony" is a part of their confirmation process. I read a lot of early drafts about how "Belief in Christ will Save Sinners." It is tricky business, discussing writing based in faith with adolescents in a public school. Fortunately, I can use the This I Believe format to personalize these essays. I remember two notable students—adamant they wanted to write about their faith—who successfully narrowed their topics to powerful and personal explorations. One student wrote about how she still says her prayers before bed every night, even though for her that practice is associated with childhood, even though the parent who introduced her to her faith divorced her mother. Hers is a

powerful essay about family, trust, ritual, and love. Another wrote about the ritual of Sunday dinner after church as an organizing principle of his life, the two hours after service and before the family embarks on their weekend chores and homework provide him with a sense of serenity and connection he does not feel the rest of the week.

At first, Sheehan writing “I believe in barbecue” strikes my students as stating the stupidly obvious like writing “I believe in staplers” or “I believe in carpet” and they wonder what value a belief in something so mundane could possibly have. To my students, most of whom rarely want for—and therefore often overlook the importance of—things, a thing-based belief appears to be rooted in foolishness or materialism. I point out that the line “I believe in barbecue” not only answers the promise Sheehan establishes in his introduction: to avoid the “grave and serious”—but that by focusing on a concrete and specific thing, he paves the way to write an essay that engages not just our cerebral selves, but our visceral ones.

Most of the students in AP Lang & Comp are ambitious juniors experiencing the highest intensity of their high school identities. Many of them organize their lives around pursuits that in two years’ time will transform from crucially important associations to merely fond memories. I have to honor my students’ realities about the importance of their involvement in band, show choir, sports, and theatre even though I know that in two years, most of my students will leave these associations behind. I remember my own intense passion for marching band when I was in high school and the pain of being cast as Javert instead of Valjean in *Les Misérables*. My students, as many of us did in high school, organize their identities and their beliefs around belonging to certain groups and rejecting others. Because of this tension in their personal lives, the invitation to write about a life-shaping belief often leads to essays titled: I Believe Band is Life, I Believe Show Choir is Life, I Believe Basketball is the Best Sport. I don’t mean to impugn these early drafts—we all write them—but Sheehan’s essay reveals the connection between a concrete and sensual thing and a larger ideological belief in a concise sentence: “I believe in barbecue.”

After investigating Sheehan's essay, we learn his belief is tied to powerful and persistent human ideas—broad and noble abstractions—but he doesn't begin there. He begins with "barbecue," a strategy I can encourage my students to adopt. The student who struggled to concretize his experience in show choir had difficulty showing to a reader why it mattered to him. After I asked him to stop thinking about the abstractions and emotions and focus on a concrete element of show choir that represented these, he wrote an essay about costumes. In fact, he wrote about the costume change: the pace, the unselfconsciousness, the excitement of becoming someone else while still belonging to a group. That student's essay revealed a lot about what was important to him—and because he focused on a costume or uniform as a marker of his belief, students involved in other uniformed activities, from sports to marching band to dance to cheer, engaged with his work at a more intimate level as readers and peers.

It also helps that barbecue seems like a silly thing to write about. In addition to being ambitious 17-year-olds, most of my students think of their lives as unremarkable. With a handful of exceptions every year, most of my AP Lang students come from solidly middle-class, Mid-western families. Millard is a picture of urban sprawl with the requisite strip malls, national fast-food chains, banal sports bars, shi-shi yoga studios, and drive-through coffee huts. They drive to school, rarely carpooling even though most live no more than 3 miles away, and after school they drive to work; for most of my students this means driving through one intersection from the school parking lot to the mega-grocery store and strip mall complex across the street. When my students venture eastward toward downtown Omaha, they rarely go anywhere outside the gentrified neighborhoods. When they hold their experiences up against some of the other writers we read: Azir Nafisi, Caesar Chavez, Malcolm X, Sherman Alexie, Maya Angelou—they are fairly open to recognizing their privilege, but they are reluctant to think of their experiences and values as interesting.

To help shape their perspective, I offer them stories from my own childhood. I lived in a desert town in California for a few years—a town so small it didn't have a McDonald's or a pizza place. We had to

drive 30 minutes get a Happy Meal. I tell them the idea of walking across the street from school to grab a coffee or go to Godfather's, China Inn, a taco shop, or a sushi restaurant is remarkable for a lot of teens. It would've sounded like paradise to my 12-year-old self. I point out how for high school students living in highly urban areas, the very notion of getting in one's own car and driving 15 minutes west to attend a pop-up party in the middle of a fallow cornfield is almost inconceivable. My students resist at first: "my job is boring," "field parties are stupid," "Godfather's sucks." I tend to agree with them. Pushing carts and sacking groceries is not stimulating, field parties are dangerous—and illegal, and Godfather's doesn't make a notable pizza. But, I tell them, that doesn't mean the *people* living these lives aren't valuable, interesting, or important. I ask them to consider the parts of their day-to-day routines they love. I point them to Jay Allison's introduction in the broadcast version of Sheehan's essay. He explains "the subject of [Sheehan's] belief was on the seat next to him in two plastic bags." The blurb under Sheehan's headshot on the NPR page hosting the essay reveals his "barbecue obsession began at 16 with a trip to Hercules Chicken and Ribs in his hometown of Rochester, New York." Sheehan's subject matter arises from his quotidian experiences—not his life's tragedies and climaxes. I ask my students to think about their everyday lives, to look for the moments they find joy, or peace, or a sense of stability and security. For many of my students this is a useful exercise outside of a writing class; they tend to focus on the hectic and stressful demands of their junior year: hours of work, hours of homework, hours of practice, heartbreak and infatuation, scholarship applications, this parents' divorce, this parent's cancer diagnosis, this sibling's drug abuse, this one's perfectionism. Seventeen is a rough age. My students find some relief in creating a list of calming moments. These often lead to interesting essays.

After showing them how Sheehan's subject arises from writing about the familiar and the everyday, I talk with my students about ways into writing. I tell them that inspiring events are wonderful reasons to write—but these do not happen very often. The mission of a writer isn't necessarily to stumble across a fantastic idea no one has ever written about, but to write well about that which interests them, to do what

William Kloefkorn taught me in an undergraduate creative writing course: “to make the ordinary extraordinary.” This lesson led a student who struggled to find something “interesting” to write about to explore her relationship with the trampoline in her backyard. Her parents bought it for her as a gift when she was 10 or 11, and she loved it. She and her friends spent a few years bouncing. Then they grew up and got busy. Now the student goes out after sunset to lay on her trampoline and look at the stars. Sometimes she falls asleep out there. Her essay about her “uninteresting relationship” with a trampoline is sweet, touching, and revelatory.

And all that is possible in “There’s No Such Thing...” before moving past Sheehan’s third sentence.

### **What Other Wonders Await**

“There’s No Such Thing As Too Much Barbecue” does much more than demonstrate unusual ways of arriving at a subject and developing an introduction. The essay cleverly works through a series of accelerating paragraphs to a conclusion that violates the promise to avoid the “grave and serious” where Sheehan reveals he’s been writing about “truth” (with an implied capital “T”), history and home” all along.

The second paragraph of the essay is a gesamtkunstwerk of structure, rhythm, and sound. From the sizzling sibilants of “cuisine, solace, celebration, presentations, sauced, [and] costillas” to the percussive parallels of “soul food and comfort food and health food” and “regional derivations, in its ethnic translations,” to the deliberate extended fragment of the second ‘sentence’ of the paragraph, Sheehan’s playfulness as writer emerges. This is a fun paragraph to read aloud, to hear the way the choices Sheehan makes compel us to become instruments of tone and voice. I invite my students to read this paragraph aloud. It doesn’t take long before we all sound a little like Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*. By giving students evidence non-fiction writers (not just poets) play with phonic effects and rhythms, I give students permission to play in the same space in their work. They begin to learn diction and syntax not only convey

meaning, but musicality. I start to see direct references to this kind of experimentation in their author's notes when I take in work for commentary. Students start to ask if the rhythm of their sentences conveys an emotional weight or if I notice any interesting sound effects. One of my students who wrote an essay about baseball experimented with using different consonant clusters during the at-bat and fielding parts of the essay to reflect the way the game sounds to him. These experiments do not always pay off—but they give emerging writers something to latch on to. I have had students who struggled with other parts of their essays find delight in manipulating sound and rhythm.

Style and voice aside, the real fun of this paragraph is its ironic deviation from Sheehan's opening commitment. Without dwelling on any one aspect for barbecue's reach for more than a flash, Sheehan demonstrates how it is a complete spiritual "soul food," emotional, "comfort food," and physical "health food" manifestation of the human condition. That it transcends geographic "regional derivations" and cultural "ethnic translations." That it exists across wealthy, middle-class, and low-income socio-economic levels and unites rural, suburban, and urban spaces. The paragraph ends comparing barbecue to "sunshine and great sex," essential components—I remind my students—of life. Essentially, the second paragraph of "There Is No Such Thing..." argues "Barbecue is Life." It just does so in more compelling language than my students use in their early drafts. The optimism in this opening paragraph sets the tone for the rest of the essay. After discussing the techniques at work, and the central idea of the paragraph, I typically move outside the essay to introduce theories from Kevin Kelly and Richard Wrangham.

In Wrangham's book *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human*, the Professor of Biological Anthropology at Harvard contends "cooking—because it made more calories available from existing foods and reduced the caloric cost of digestion—was the breakthrough technological innovation that allowed humans to support big brains" which then led to significant cultural effects (Shaw). Essentially, Wrangham claims—as Sheehan indirectly suggests—that cooking is both essential to, and a universal expression of, human identity. We are human because we cook. The connection to Kelly's *What Technology*

*Wants* is a bit more oblique, but his assertion that over the course of human history, the technium (the force or phenomena of all technology) is “powerful and self generating...maturing into its own thing” (19). Kelly proposes that technology, not humanity, demands the next innovation. Sheehan writes “I believe in the art of generations of pit men.... A barbecue cook must have an intimate understanding of his work: the physics of fire and convection the hard science of meat and heat and smoke.” I have my students read that sentence aloud too; I get them to feel the fricatives thrumming in the background, to hear the drums of our ancestors booming “meat and heat and smoke.” Essentially, I tell my students, that from the moment we began to use tools to control fire and cook food, we set in motion a series of inevitable social, cultural, and technological advances. As soon as we developed roasting spits and cooking skewers, we needed a place to put food—that demanded plates and platters. Then, because the food might be too hot to hold in our hands we needed forks and chopsticks. Now we needed a place to put them: tables, and store them: cabinets, and protect them: houses. Now that we have these, and means of storing and preserving food, we have holiday meals, feasts and celebrations that revolve around our social calendar, not around our success or failure in a hunt. Almost all technological innovations trace back to our relationship with food and the community built around it. At the root of Sheehan’s essay is the universality of humanity.

So much of what we value or believe we use as markers to divide us. Many (if not most) universal human ideas like race, religion, economic theory, or national identities invite conflict. Sheehan’s essay focuses on one of the few things that crosses these artificially constructed boundaries to unite us: cooking and eating. In this space I have the opportunity to discuss the value in this kind of personal essay. To explore how pointing to and naming a belief—rather than trying to convince others to change their beliefs—can provide more effective pathways to empathy and reconciliation.

At this point, some of my students ask the dreaded “intent” question. They assume I’m pulling some kind of English teacher, kung-fu, bullshit. I remind them it doesn’t matter much what a writer

intends, but what a writer provokes an audience to think. And, as students of rhetoric and composition, it matters that we can develop and defend a line of reasoning rooted in evidence from the text to justify why we think what we think. But I can also point them to Sheehan's fourth paragraph where he explicitly writes "barbecue drives culture" to defend my assertion. Sheehan reminds us "the first blows for equality and civil rights in the Deep South were made...in barbecue shacks." The essay is about justice; it is about equality. Students sometimes doubt Sheehan's claim. Despite a somewhat progressive editorial bias, the AP US History textbooks in our district fail to discuss the significance of barbecue to integration. I always have on hand an excerpt from Shelton Reed's "North Carolina Barbecue" in which Guggenheim Fellowship Award-winning professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill writes "[t]he appetite for good barbecue transcended the color line...as Black [people] and white [people] ate take-out from each other's restaurants." I explain that the activists who pushed formal and legal adoption of Civil Rights and integration wouldn't have made much progress if non-activists didn't believe integration was possible. Because Black people and white people shared food, we knew we shared humanity. Food is often our first introduction to "the other." I point my students to variety of ethnic restaurants populating the strip malls of their suburb: Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Mexican, Indian, Middle Eastern, Japanese. The cuisine around Millard West is magnificently more diverse than the population of the school. Most of my students have eaten sushi, gyro, egg drop soup, spring rolls, pad Thai, and tacos. Our interest in one another's food, and acceptance of that food, demonstrates our interest in and possible acceptance of one another. Reed's essay, in addition to exploring how barbecue transcended the color line, discusses how different immigrant groups from the colonial period onward, contribute to barbecue culture—German's preference for mustard-based sauces, influence from the Caribbean bringing piquant seasonings, the traditions of English and French style cooking all meld into a universal food. Sheehan suggests that at a barbecue table—we are all one.



I ask my students to explore the remaining paragraphs and identify the larger abstraction each articulates. The fifth paragraph’s “I believe any place with a menu longer than can fit on a single page—or better yet, just a chalkboard—is coming dangerously close to putting on airs” provokes discussions of honesty and quality. Students come up with area restaurants with long, elaborate menus: Tanner’s (an uninspired local sports bar), Red Robin, The Cheesecake Factory, and compare them to places with single pages or chalkboards: Dante (an Italian farm-to-table bistro), Javi’s Tacos, Block 16 (a farm-to-table “street food” restaurant and home to Alton Brown’s favorite hamburger in the country). They realize the truth of Sheehan’s premise—doing a few things well and using fresh ingredients leads to better food, and better shared experiences, than the predictability of Applebee’s.

Students understand paragraph 6 is about love, not just a love of cooking, but a love of the customer. “Mama in the back doing ‘taters’ and hushpuppies and sweet tea” not only cares about what she makes, but the people she feeds. Some of my students work at fast food restaurants. I ask them how much they and their coworkers “love” their work and how they perceive their customers. The answers are not surprising; but they do give students who haven’t worked in food service pause.

Students discover paragraph 7 is about generosity, 8 is about unselfconscious joy.

As we finish working through “There’s No Such Thing...” the connections between Sheehan’s immediate and concrete subject of barbecue and his ideological and abstract subject of an optimistic assessment of the human condition become clear.

### **And for Dessert**

I not only have a chance to provide my students with an excellent essay that, as the original invitation to the This I Believe Project predicts, “stimulate[s] and help[s] those who hear it,” (This I Believe) but also lets me explore an essay that isn’t “grave” or “distracted” (Sheehan). It’s fun to talk about food with students. During this lesson, I ask them to name their comfort foods—I’ll never forget the student who

replied “croutons”—or describe the best meal they’ve ever eaten. Students who’ve lived or traveled abroad share their experiences at cafes and street carts. I get to introduce them to soul food. With the exception of one student—who not only knew what hocks & greens were, but also livers & gizzards, sweet potato pie, and collards—what my students know about soul food ends at chicken and waffles. I bring up a Google map of soul food restaurants in and around the city—most of them in parts of town they don’t venture—and encourage them to go (with their parents’ consent or accompaniment, of course.) I get to tell them the story of my stumbling into a barbecue joint in the front room of a small home in North Seattle—barely 20, hungry, and mostly broke. The house had a cardboard sign in the window with “Barbecue Open” written in magic marker. The menu was a single sheet of paper: “Ribs, Brisket, Chicken, Links, Combo, Sides.” (Seriously, it didn’t list any sides, just the word “sides.”) An alarmingly large man emerged from the farmhouse-style kitchen door and asked “What do you want, boy?” I answered “barbecue” and he pointed me to a card table in the corner of the living room and handed me a folding chair. By the end of the night we were both sitting on couch, eating barbecue, and watching Monday night football. We, who would otherwise be strangers, spent the evening as neighbors. Food and conversations about it bring us together. This is the crux of Sheehan’s essay.

I have taught this essay for over 10 years and it never ceases to energize me. Revisiting it again in the school year of 2020-2021 added a new layer of meaning. Amidst restaurant closures, festival cancellations, and anxiety about gathering with other people—especially while eating and drinking—the importance of cooking and dining with members of our human tribe took on even more power. This essay does much more than exhibit clever exigence and stylistic flourish for our students to emulate. It offers more than an example of writing well about the familiar and making the ordinary extraordinary. It unearths and celebrates an often-unconsidered component of our shared, essential, humanity.

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