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Dear ██████████:

It is with sadness and disappointment that I announce my retirement from my position as Instructor of English, effective December 2, 2021. In this current climate of “non-negotiable” discussion concerning medical mandates and the overstepping of American citizens’ constitutional rights, my views on medical freedom and bodily autonomy stand in stark contrast to those of the university’s administration.

Rather than the straightforward announcement of my retirement on its own, this five-page letter also follows my circuitous path as a teacher at UL at Lafayette. I have chosen to compose my letter of resignation as though stitching a seam. Its development will combine different threads, most importantly, my official resignation as a member of the department. It will also trace my personal history on this campus, where I have served and have come to love the people who have built it, who have supported it, and who call it their community.

Other portions of my letter will refer to the current view held by administration—a disturbing view to me—that an individual’s right to choose what is best for her body can be denied without regard to her autonomy. In essence, the mandate, which was announced this semester (to be “fully vaccinated” by early January 2022), expresses an insidious belief, that the hours I spend conducting my life—within and apart from the classroom—are not my own. I do not hold the same belief. Instead, I stand with others who adhere to the powerful words of the Nuremberg Code of 1947: “The voluntary consent of the human subject is absolutely essential.” For my part in this resistance to Phase 3 of an experimental drug trial—and as the world awaits what is being referred to as “Nuremberg 2.0”—my case against the federal and university mandates is this letter. My defense is my humanity.

For several weeks, my conscience has been torn between two desires: 1) my desire to give my students the best I can as their writing teacher during this trying semester; and 2) my desire—in fact, my innate need and inalienable right—to keep my soul intact. I am honoring the former while having chosen the latter. The administration’s strategy to inch toward the requirement for all faculty and staff to be injected before next semester with a product that the Louisiana Department of

Health refers to as a “genetic instruction manual” has precipitated my decision to leave before the end of Fall 2021. My final day of teaching at UL at Lafayette will be November 30.

I am sorry that circumstances have encroached on my ability to continue teaching face-to-face for the duration of this semester. My intent is to make my departure as seamless as possible. Thus, I have chosen the option of conducting my classes fully online until the end of November. By early December, I will have fulfilled my task as teacher to my enrolled students this semester and will end my professional, albeit patchwork, life here.

Like so many semesters behind me, Fall 2021 began with my efforts to offer my students “something useful,” a phrase I use to describe my hallmark course exercise: to practice writing an “interesting grammatical sentence.” I insist to my students that if they can accomplish writing an effective sentence, they can write anything. Now I am called to task as I compose my own grammatical sentences for this letter. As I challenge my students, I too must become my own best teacher and guide as I stitch together, in retrospect, my story.

I earned a Bachelor of Arts (1982) and a Master of Arts (1984) at UL at Lafayette when it was the University of Southwestern Louisiana. After graduation I taught for a time in a Gifted and Talented Program in Louisiana’s public school system. Then, in 1988, after returning from Asia where I had considered teaching English as a second language, I joined the English Department as Adjunct Instructor. In 1990 I designed a memoir writing class for elders, a course which gave me joy for more than a decade. At the end of that decade, at age forty, I had to confront the practicality of staying committed to a youthful dream, not to be concerned with “how much money I make.” (As a teenager I had announced to a friend as we neared high school graduation, “I don’t care how much money I make. I just want to love what I do.”) In 2001, I gave up teaching life writers and adapted my teaching to a schedule devoted solely to undergraduates in my capacity as a newly appointed full-time instructor. Now in 2021 with the requirement to receive an injection, I am learning as I did then, that my love for teaching has come at a price. As you will read in the following paragraphs, I’ve chosen to remain rich in soul rather than become fiscally—and bodily—captured by yielding to the medical mandate.

The university’s assumption that it rules the decisions I make to keep my body healthy is a violation of a part of myself that I refuse to relinquish. As I stand in my decision, I hear echoes of my former life writing students’ stories. Their combined total age ranged between 600-1000 years in each class, and they often told me that I must “keep [my] health.” “Hold onto your health, Joan. You’ll be grateful for it in old age.” I am grateful that I have listened to my intuition and have followed their elder wisdom.

The mixed emotions I face with the ending of my instructorship are tempered by the fact that I am choosing what is right for myself instead of partaking in the university’s decision to choose against itself (how can a university deny one of its members her capacity to choose on behalf of her own body—am I not part of that which makes it “the whole, a *corporate* body”?).

I recognize my contribution to the “whole” of this university as I end this phase of my professional life. One of my legacies is the compilation of my students’ names. It is a patchwork-style roster, a roster of students whose ages have ranged from 5 to 101 years old. From young preschoolers in summer gifted programs on campus, to undergraduates in literature, writing, and vocabulary courses, to life writers in my self-designed memoir writing course—when I leave, I will carry with me the

memories of my interactions with the practicing writers who allowed me to teach them “something useful.”

You and I know—painfully so—that teaching in a system that rewards money-making programs rather than individuals who willingly and doggedly give “something useful” to their students can be a bone-crushing experience. I have explained to you that, at heart, my choice to continue honoring a pledge to my twenty-something-year-old self is an inviolable choice. My choices concerning medication found their autonomy when, as a young woman in her twenties (the same age as many of my students today), I had an adverse reaction to an over-the-counter drug which I had taken to relieve symptoms of a cold. I didn’t think of it as research then, but I investigated the general protocol of drug companies. As a USL (now University of Louisiana at Lafayette) alumna, I used what I had been taught in classrooms on this campus and throughout my Louisiana public school experience under the guidance and through the dedication of my own teachers: critical thinking skills, what I recognize as the ability to think for oneself and to assess situations and problems from multiple perspectives.

Unlike many of the students I teach today, I had been gifted with the freedom to discover truth for myself and to choose without coercive influence. Sometimes I struggled with the consequences of my choices. I am proud of the young woman I used to be who—on her own—recognized that even though the recommended dosage of a drug had been deemed as safe medicine by the FDA, it was not safe for her. After my experience in the mid-1980s, I chose to remain as medication-free as I could throughout my life. As a result, I have not ingested any medication for at least 35 years—not prescription medication, not over-the-counter drugs, nor any illicit drugs (I’ve joked with colleagues and friends that I’ve not even soused myself with alcohol to combat the stress of teaching in twenty-first-century America). I continue to embrace the struggle individuals face to learn for themselves “something useful” (in my case, it has been the potential effects of medication). By making the decision to forego medication, I have allowed myself to do what I encourage my students to do, to “question everything” and to make choices with which they can live.

I submit that my health choices have contributed to this university’s health—as well as to the health of this state and of this nation. In a practical way (though generally understated or ignored by statisticians), my physical health has benefitted the fiscal health of government and public entities. I have learned from the Human Resources Office that upon retirement, Louisiana will honor only 200 of more than 3100 sick leave days that I have accrued (my financial loss in unused sick days will be about \$70,000). The beneficial consequence of my health has resulted in a minimal financial return to myself, evidence that Louisiana’s retirement system capitalizes its gain not by reward of service, but by insult to and theft of a faculty member’s right to make healthy choices. The three times I have tapped into my health savings account were in 2021, after having spent multiple 18-hour-working-days in front of a computer last year as I sought to give my students a decent learning experience under excruciating demands. If I were to calculate my investment return in terms of dollars which my health has saved the university and Louisiana, I would walk away a poor woman. I know, however, that I am walking away richer than my bank account. The richness of my memories and the value of standing in my decision to reject the university’s mandated vaccination cannot be compared to accounting principles.

Throughout 2020 I remained healthy and was surprised to find myself on two separate mornings awakening from the fetal position that my body had moved into overnight. The tears I cried in 2020 were for myself and for my students (many of them expressed to me their confusion and emotional

and mental fatigue because of social isolation and their health issues, which were exacerbated by intensive computer work). My anger is toward those in power who have positioned themselves to run ramrod against individual choice—on all levels. I am not the frontier of technocrats who view remoteness—of both workplace and classroom—as their future country of economic benefit. Nor am I beholden to pharmaceutical companies—not even to the government of this land when it denies bodily sovereignty—and particularly, not to this university, which is now setting itself as despot above my right to address my health concerns as I seek to listen to and to honor my body’s distinct messages. I invoke the unseen authority which gave men and women of my parents’ and grandparents’ generations the compassion, power, and apperception to conceive the Nuremberg Code. My decision to leave the university is my rejection of the dehumanizing policy of the mandate.

An additional aspect of my history (beyond the university’s insistence that I receive their selected medical therapy) is that I am weary, weary of having taught at a university that has been underpaying me for many years. Confirmation of this loss of salary is the letter I received from the Provost in September announcing an “equity adjustment” to my base salary [REDACTED]. I have been aware of the short shrift of my earnings, but I have been just as aware—in fact, more keenly aware—that the years I have spent as Instructor of English have comprised not a salaried career, but a response to a calling. I am retiring, yes, but not from my vocation. I am quitting because I cannot teach within a system that demands my body as its property.

As an adjunct instructor for over ten years, I taught while receiving an income statistically above, but only slightly higher than, the IRS’s poverty-line. I will leave UL at Lafayette at a higher income level than I earned when I began teaching here, but still that of lower middle class (lower than the income bracket which categorized my parents’ earnings as they supported their family). I’ve not taught for a paycheck. Perhaps I cannot accurately say why I teach, but I have an inkling. Perhaps I am a teacher because I seek to honor the spark that has given me strength to write this letter (it seems to me that these words have been in draft form for a hundred years). Reflecting on my teaching history has given me the strength to walk away from this university at this stage in my life without regret. The medical mandate has challenged me to draw strength from the choices I made long ago. My youthful resoluteness to remain medication-free has served me well.

My independent health choices have also benefitted this university by allowing me to overcome the incremental stressors that have been placed on teachers for decades. It should come as no surprise that in the early 2000s the teaching profession was ranked as the most stressful in America (above the level of a neurosurgeon’s daily encounters). I learned a few years ago that teaching has also outranked the stress of emergency medical technicians at risk of burnout. It was a case of “severe burnout” (as I called it) that led me to take a year’s leave of absence in 2010-2011 to mend fences and to herd goats and cattle and to care for infant twins who, since they have grown old enough, continue to call me “friend.”

Effective teachers are a stalwart group. They fight burnout. They fight against demoralizing burdens and bureaucracy. They often fight incredible odds simply to teach their students “something useful.” My choice to leave during this odd period in history is not defeat. Rather than giving up, I’m no longer giving in. I am not walking away from a job; nor am I walking away from my calling to teach others. I am simply not giving in to restrictions on my health choices, particularly since they have protected me with good health for so many decades. Now that I am an elder—as were my former life writing students when they instructed me—I am still “keeping my health.”

There has been nothing simple or easy about my decision to retire—and I certainly have not made it without tears and sleepless nights. I've written multiple drafts of this letter and argued points inside my head as judge, jury, and plaintiff. My words have risen in private as complaine. Now I have written some of them to you (and to whomever at this university has any concern for how current affairs are affecting one teacher—and most likely, many others, not only nonvaccinated teachers, staff, and students, but their families and communities, including many members of this campus life who have chosen to be vaccinated). I personally know of many others whose choice to take the fast-tracked vaccine was made so they can continue their commitment of financial support to family members, especially to their children. Hard pressed by the recent mandate of vaccination proof, as one dear colleague has observed, many individuals feel that their free will has been diminished to 80%, perhaps 60%. The 20-40% loss in their pressured decision has been created by the imbalance of power between the administration and informed consent and the need to support a family. Although I will be retiring earlier than planned and will be receiving less than the monthly income I have been receiving from my twenty-year unadjusted base salary, I too recognize the imbalance between personal choice and the university's controlling dictates. My choice to retire six to seven years before I intended restores the balance in my favor. No longer will I submit to the university's efforts to demean my individuality.

During our recent conversations you've witnessed an intensity in my speech that is new to you. I have spoken with emotion and justifiable anger (have no doubt—what this university is enforcing is unconstitutional). Although supported by many faculty members as I grieve over my decision to leave, I have also been treated as a pariah on this campus (those examples are too personal and too disturbing for me to relate in this letter).

When I leave the department in early December, I will have completed my task. I walk away encouraged by the echo of voices of my former students. Were I limited to two comments uttered by students about my contribution to this university as a teacher for over three decades, they would be these: 1) a student's remarks that she "would take a thousand classes with [me]"; and 2) the words from a practicing writer, a young veteran of the U. S. military, who told me over a decade ago, "You know, if I'd've had you the first go 'round, I'd be a different kind of man." I sometimes weep whenever I recall the awe in his voice when he discovered that—finally—a teacher had taken time with him to help him write his own "interesting grammatical sentence."

It is for students like those and the thousands of others whom I have taught that I am proud to have offered them the opportunity—indeed, the freedom—to choose to improve their writing. They are the heart of a university. Our students, as well as their dedicated professors, embody goals toward which a university should strive. For my students—former and present—I carry a legacy I can be proud of as I resign from the Department of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, effective this December.

Safe passage in this tumultuous storm. My best to you and to my colleagues.

Joan E. Stear, *Instructor of English*
University of Louisiana at Lafayette

Attachments:

- 1) [REDACTED]
- 2) Letter to a Student Journalist, J. Elizabeth Stear (Spring 2021)
- 3) Transcript of Speech, "I Have Four Things to Tell You," J. Elizabeth Stear (Spring 2018)