Held Hostage by Our Students, as told by One of the Hostages
Thomas J. Cottle
In memory of Mr. Jack Ellison

In his extraordinary discourse, on justice, the late John Rawls (1971) divides the world’s jobs into two categories: the responsible and the non–responsible. His designations tell the whole story. Clearly there are activities in a society that must be maintained, as well as activities that, if lost temporarily or permanently, would be felt, but cannot legitimately be labeled indispensable. An unobtrusive telltale of these two categories is a society’s reaction to a profession that threatens to go on strike. When it’s professional hockey players we grouse; when it’s the teachers we claim they have no right. Don’t they ever think of the children!

My father, a physician, proffered the Rawls distinction this way: If you aren’t doing something that is life or death, it isn’t worth doing. Teaching, like medicine, for him, was definitely a life or death enterprise. Schools surely can kill the spirit and intellectual curiosity of young people, just as they can redeem these same young people. Well, not schools exactly; more precisely, teachers, counselors, staff members, administrators. Beyond all curricula, it might be argued, beyond all plans for new visions of schools or academic programs, this feeling regarding the life and death nature of the teacher’s work must lie at the core of the ethos of the educational experience. Schools, I think it fair to say, must remain committed not to making periodic observations of the needs of children, or the conditions of classrooms, or the art and science of teaching. More accurately, they must be
committed to staying with teachers, administrators, and especially students for as long as the work of educating a single mind takes. And if one reads closely the writings of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, this work goes for eternity.

Levinas, who died in 1995 at the age of eighty-nine, is a particularly intriguing figure, although he is rarely read in education courses. Once aligned with Martin Heidegger, Levinas broke off all allegiances to his mentor for both philosophical and ideological reasons. But as one considers some of the tenets of his philosophy, one wonders whether in fact they do properly resonate in the lives of teachers.

The essence of the Levinas position, and possibly the teacher’s position as well, is that there is a responsibility owed to the students. Well, owed isn’t exactly what Levinas (1982, 1985) writes. In fact what he says is that the greatest ethical act we can experience is to discover that we have taken responsibility for another. Notice the language. We do not will this sense of responsibility, we discover its presence in our own lives. The debt, as it were, and this is his word, of human responsibility for the other is never fulfilled, never paid back. As Levinas claims, it extends to eternity. And, as if this were not enough, let us be reminded in this context of the words of Jacques Derrida (in Steiner1990, page 92): “We did not choose this responsibility, it imposes itself upon us” (emphasis added).

Ethical behavior, this act of discovering that one has taken responsibility for another, which, one might argue, sits as the foundation of the didactic experience, does not for Levinas derive from logical reasoning. Nor does it
sit somewhere in space ready, somehow, to be ignited. Rather, it appears to be born in the encounter with the stranger, the child, the student. We move, it could be said, toward this responsibility, just as we move toward the student, just as we move toward the other in the act of empathy. The encounter with the student, a complete stranger to us at the outset of the semester, causes us to feel a call, as it were, to our humanness. How logical therefore, that we say, I have been called to teaching, or teaching is my calling.

But how can this be so when, at the commencement of every classroom experience, we all as teachers stand before total strangers? Herein Levinas’s (1982) response. He writes that because we are held hostage by the gaze of the stranger, how possibly can we harm the other who holds us hostage! Besides, as Christ taught, it is easy to attend to the loved one; more significantly, how does one treat the “stranger in our midst? Even as we are “held hostage” by the other we are in effect set free. Indeed, the acts of affirming the other, or sacrificing for the other, liberate both of us. Let us be reminded here that the word “hostage” derives from the words “lodging” and “pledge.” In finding a lodging in your gaze, as long as I am here I shall find myself taking responsibility for you. Said differently, one derives a sense of self from the life one leads with another and the responsibility inherent in being held hostage by the other. Without this life force there cannot emerge a genuine knowledge and sense of self. Nor can there be anything in the society resembling genuine justice. Does this not sound like the ethical creed of a good teacher, and a good school?

What Levinas is referring to, of course, is that magical relationship between
teacher and student. The other person, he writes, (1985, page 116) is felt as a weight that I encounter pushing against me. . . a weight existing in my behalf (emphasis added). “In his face the Other appears to me not as an obstacle, nor as a menace I evaluate, but as what measures me.” In a similar manner, the act of affirmation is intended for both of us; I affirm my self as I affirm your self. The philosopher Dennis Donoghue (2001, page 53) takes the point one step farther. “The primary act is the spontaneous one by which I address another person as ‘you.’ I ground my own mode of existence solely upon that act.” I cannot, therefore, become me, develop my own concept of self without acknowledging you, and taking responsibility for you. In this way, finally, societies come to be formed, for in a sense they are nothing more than the “gathering together of those who speak and listen,” (Donoghue, 2001, page 53) a phrase, not so incidentally, that might well characterize the enterprise undertaken in so many schools we consider to be good, and just.

Something else Levinas proffers speaks, I believe, to the glorious role of the pedagogue, and pedagogy generally. The act of teaching is, in some transcendent manner, an act of affirmation of both person and intellectual pursuit. It is, perhaps, made possible by the receptivity to human stimuli, in turn made possible by acts of affirmation. It is not merely prior experience and knowledge that launches the teacher, but the discovery of the willingness, even the necessity to affirm the other. But this means that my self must remain “open,” vulnerable, not just to you, but to the reverberations in itself that it experiences as a function of encountering you. In genuine affirmation, in what Levinas called “sensibility”—we might recall Aristotle’s (1962) term, “insensibility,” meaning a form of feelinglessness—
made possible through the summons of the other, I find my self able to respond to you. I can feel the stimulation and sense of being roused by you even without ever having previously known anything about you. I am merely responding to your summons. I am merely responding to the felt sense and the ensuing stirring within me caused by being held hostage by your gaze.

Within the mutual gaze is the summoning, therefore, of our moral obligation to take responsibility for the other, the student, and thereby create the genuinely just relationship. Truth be told, genuine seeing is believing, in the other and the self. I am compelled to believe in otherness as well as “selfness,” but only if I am willing to risk responding to the summons of my students, take the responsibility for them and, in looking back, meet their gaze. The result, if Levinas can be believed, is the underwriting of human possibility, the ultimate affirmation of the collection of miraculous strangers I call my class, and the ultimate organization of human beings I properly call just.

Provocative words, summons, being held by the gaze, the calling of the other through affirmation, the taking of responsibility for another for eternity. These are hardly the acts performed by those who stop but for a moment to examine an injustice, a wrongdoing, or a school or classroom that just may not be functioning in the most optimal fashion. They are more likely the acts of those persons committed to stay for eternity to ensure that a child is educated. And would you believe, I knew one of these eternal affirmers?

It hardly took a genius to recognize that the kid who always spoke up in
class, appeared able to play with ideas, and enjoy class discussions, had a bit of a writing problem. Well, perhaps more than a bit. His sentences tended to drag on. Starting on Webster Avenue on Chicago’s north side, they seemed to conclude in the mountains above Salt Lake City, Utah. But if their length caused a problem to the reader, the fact that the barely discernible ideas embedded within them were in no way connected, and that no coherent story ever properly emerged seemed not to trouble the young author. Why bother to help the reader glide from one idea to the next and follow a reasoned argument when one can simply leap about all over the place. The reader would do well filling in the blanks himself; it was an important part of the reading experience.

In fact, the writing style of this young man seemed reminiscent, somehow, of his reading disability. No matter how hard he tried, large sections of printed material never seemed to be incorporated into his brain. They just remained home like the half of the baseball squad that missed the team bus. So how different was it to write with the same thought ravines and gulleys that emerged as well when reading. Poor kid, he was too early for the generation that offered up all varieties of linguistic hiding places meant to cover up these defective capacities. What he would have given for a phrase like, “Like, I mean, you know. Whatever.” Besides, it takes too much energy to go back and examine whether anything you have written makes sense. What’s most important here, that you know what you wanted to say, or that you said it in a way that others could comprehend it? Obviously, what you wanted to say wins the day. Point made.

Okay, so there’s the premise: I reach high school struggling in my reading
and writing, and imagining, like all children who nowadays are diagnosed with dyslexia as nowadays I would have been, that not a single teacher knew of this struggle. How could they know when I spoke with such passion in class! Words don’t matter, I must have deduced, when a wonderful energy rises up like steam from a soup from the pages of those majestic high school essays. “Come on, Mr. Ellison, you knew what I was going for in that paragraph. All right, I grant you, a six-page paragraph borders on the lengthy, but you got more than the gist of it. Admit it, Mr. E., you could see from where these gorgeous ideas sprang and where they were headed if only your assignment allowed for a longer page limit, say five hundred pages, which reduces to about, what, thirty sentences. I knew what I was saying, so maybe it’s possible that you have a bit of a reading problem too. I’m only saying it’s possible. I know what you mean employing the word prolix in your comments; I know you’re not recommending an anti-depressant. I understand prolix, protracted, a bit wordy, a tad flowery. You still got what I was saying. Let me put it succinctly: the paper deserved a better grade!”

Decades later, as a teacher I find myself wanting to write in the columns of a student’s essay the words Mr. Ellison too, may have wished to write: “I have no idea what this sentence means nor how possibly it relates to what has come before and what comes after. Forget prolix. It would be all right if it made some sense, even if it did sit here in the middle of a paragraph like a lovely little island unto itself. But even unto itself, a little Puerto Rico, a little Dominican Republic, a little Aruba, it is utterly incomprehensible!”

And do you believe that decades later I find myself defending the student who I recognize as living with the same struggle I had, and still have. I smile and mutter the words, “You don’t get it, teacher, because this is written in
code. Believe me, the people it is meant for will grasp and treasure every syllable. They will have no trouble understanding it, and they will blossom from the experience merely of encountering it. Believe me, they won’t mumble words like, ‘Tommy, the opening paragraph alone has nineteen topic sentences. Besides, no other teachers ever told me they had problems with my papers.’”

“The problem with you, Mr. Ellison, is you never could get into this brush with greatness idea. You always had to make it comprehensible, coherent, lucid. Why can’t you teachers just let the words flow over you like sea water on a Puerto Rico beach?”

I don’t know whether the late Jack Ellison, our dazzlingly literate English teacher, read anything of Levinas. I am moved to say if he didn’t, Levinas is probably the only significant writer he didn’t read. But he knew about ethical behavior, the act of discovering that one has taken responsibility for another. Of this I can attest. And I am certain he would have agreed with the notion that it does indeed sit as the foundation of the didactic experience. I can attest as well to his profound appreciation of teaching as an encounter with the stranger, the child, the student. Me. Move toward the student, as one moves toward anyone in an act we label empathic? Let me assure you, he moved toward me. Moreover, he made it his business not to impose the way he constructed and recorded meaning, but instead to understand the way I constructed and transcribed meanings. He called me to him; he called me to reading and writing; he called me to learning.

“What I think we might do,” he proposed, “is find some time and go across
the street for a coke and talk about your papers.” It’s the oldest trick in the book; I do it myself in research on children: Offer them food and they’ll follow you anywhere and tell you their life stories for as long as the fries keep coming. And so we crossed Clark Street to the coke place and sat at a table near the front windows and went over my writings. We did it often, and it seems as though we might well have examined every undeveloped idea and every miserable sentence, even the ones that started right there on the corner of Webster and Clark and concluded somewhere in the Wasatch Mountain Range of Utah. He undertook the tutoring project for no financial gain, and, given his characteristically modest and discreet manner, I doubt that one student ever knew I was receiving this special treatment. Which means that I shall never know how many others sat at that table with a coke paid for by Mr. Ellison, who knew full when I thanked him each afternoon at the conclusion of our work, that the thank you was meant for the coke, not the tutoring.

I cannot report that I remember all too much of those tutorials, but some memories of those sessions still adhere. I did learn to write better; no question about that. I pledged to make sentences travel no further than central Iowa. If there were going to be islands of ideas, bridges would connect them, even if they swayed a bit. He was right moreover: the adverb count could decrease by eighty percent without much of the power of the essay being lost. In truth, without all those adverbs the essence of the essay could be revealed. And yes, I had to agree that semi colons had not been invented to enable sentences to run across the Great Plains to the snow capped peaks of the west. And yes, when referral is spelled with four r’s in the middle and commitment with three m’s in a row, reading does feel a bit
like being in a boat crashing into rocks; even small errors tend to pull the reader’s attention away from the argument being formulated.

I always knew that he was working in my behalf, even when he tolerated interminable silences waiting for my response to one of his questions. Utterly patient, he made it clear that if I didn’t conjure up something, anything, the two of us would just die there in front of the tall windows. Most important, I left feeling relieved that perhaps writing didn’t have to be pretentious, and that I wasn’t completely a fraud; his presence confirmed this. Just as it confirmed the fact, the hard scientific truth that I was not defective as I had always believed. The other person, Levinas writes, “is felt as a weight that I encounter pushing against me. . . a weight existing in my behalf.” Mr. Ellison weighed in on my behalf. There were other weights, many of them depressive that I have worked diligently to overcome, but he was not one of these.

Educators speak these days of contemplative knowing, defined in part as genuine attentiveness, openness, and requiring the gift we begin to learn as adolescents of being able to sustain contradictions, even obverse propositions. How can a student who appears so smart, write so wretchedly? The connection to another through the contemplative knowing of the other, it is alleged, yields experiences both erotic and insightful. Combined, Eros and insight result in a brand of love Levinas might have found compatible with the ethic of discovering that one has taken responsibility for the other. Such was the brand of love I felt from Mr. Ellison, a brand that has stayed with me. I am, after all, writing of an experience that occurred half a century ago. His was neither a sentimental nor self-satisfying form of love; what he
did he did for me. What he taught he taught for me. The two of us sitting there in front of the windows of the coke shop actually constitutes in my mind a way not only for teachers and students to interact, but a way of being in the classroom, a way of being in the world. These were genuine acts of education as well as self-transformation.

As students of contemplative knowing observe, the sort of instruction Mr. Ellison offered brought forth knowledge and the unfolding of a young man’s consciousness. Making these connections even more miraculous, is it not in the act of writing that one engages in the discovery of one’s consciousness and hence one’s identity? And do not these realms, consciousness and identity, constitute what Heidegger called the *Eigenwelt*, the mode of being in which the self is thrown against itself? These are the components of the conversations one has with oneself, or is it, with one’s self. And the report of these conversations is what we call writing. So when we tell our students that writing reveals your thinking, it reveals the way you have put together the ideas upon which you are ruminating, we are barely skimming the surface of this sacred act that Alec Solomita (2010) has called “a precious activity.” For writing makes possible self-talk, self-discovery, self-affirmation, self-transformation, human character. It reveals, moreover, one’s relationship with words, not to mention the encounters one has had with people whose existence confirms our very being.

Making these ideas even more powerful, Mr. Ellison came to me during my adolescence, a time, if the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1968) is to be believed, when the fundamental dilemma of human development circles around the bringing together of various domains of the self and then tossing
them out into the world like one act dramas to see how they may be reviewed. “Identity Cohesion versus Role Confusion” is the title of Erikson’s fifth of eight stages of life, the stage of adolescence. What is the menu I bring to the table, as the common expression has it, and how does the table react to my cooking, to my presence, or is it my presents? What expectations do others have for me, and do any of these expectations constitute a taking of responsibility for me? Levinas, after all, never advances the notion that having expectations and assuming responsibility are synonymous acts.

It is an awfully appealing notion Erikson puts forth of the way an individual’s temperament or genetic predispositions encounter the world of parents, teachers, and friends, not to mention the media. The payoff for each stage in Erikson’s model is a strength, or virtue, fidelity in the case of the adolescent, love in the case of the young adult, that is, if everything goes right, and the inevitable dilemma of the particular stage is successfully negotiated. But things can go awry, maladaptations can occur; the critics can be severe if not outright nasty, the world can encounter you in ways that hold you back from developing properly, healthfully, ways that convince you that identity coherence, self-exploration, and self-affirmation are of little or no value. In adolescence, Erikson theorizes, identity cohesion versus role confusion can turn into fanaticism and repudiation. In both, I have either given up on my self, or completely turned my sense of self over to others. In an analogy to writing, it is as though I refuse to write a word, or conversely, plagiarize the entire assignment. Either way, I suffer from a lack of recognition, a lack of affirmation, a lack of care. Equally significant, the lack of care, the lack of that form of instruction that is both erotic and insightful.
corrodes the very conversations I have with my self. The interior files have been corrupted and I leave the adolescent stage feeling faith in no one, most especially myself. It might be said I have no faith in faith.

Who you are, I have never told my students, is what you write. It is not what you say that allows me to know you, but what you write. For in the writing you proffer a form of intimate connection both with your self and another that is essential for the expression of a genuine self. In your writing I sneak a glimpse of the secret laboratory where you conduct your self-experiments. And you know this to be true, because you would resent it if I read even a few lines of your diaries. But do you know the role I play in the outcome of those laboratory experiments? Do you know the role I play in the musings transcribed in diaries? To be sure, writing is a craft, an art requiring eternal exercise. But apparently, like everyone of Erikson’s stages, writing also requires master teachers, master tutors, if only to make it possible for a child to feel affirmed, known, protected in the ways Levinas describes. Every child needs Mr. Ellison, and more specifically the manner in which he conducted himself with a kid smack dab in the midst of an Eriksonian search not only for identity, but for the strength provided by authentic fidelity. What in fact do I believe in? Who, in fact, do I believe in? Who can I be certain believes in me, and whose presence, just as Levinas intoned, makes me know I am me? And to think these miraculous connections might be entwined with the act of writing. Solomita is correct: Writing is as precious as the child writing.

So what then was Mr. Ellison for me? Surely he was a spiritual figure for a boy who understood absolutely nothing of the spiritual. Surely too, a
psychotherapeutic figure for a boy who even then had visited with more than a handful of handsomely groomed psychiatrists. Do we recoil at the suggestion that he was a personal “self-grower,” a life coach, a maturation guru? Surely he was more than a mere writing tutor. Is it in Neil Simon’s *The Goodbye Girl* where Richard Dreyfus, claiming to possess charisma, inquires of someone, “Do I charise you?” Could we say that Mr. Ellison “matured” me? “Grew” me? It all sounds silly until we think of the sort of taking of responsibility inherent, but never articulated in the language of responsibility put forth by Lev Vygotsky (1978).

Most all educators know Vygotsky’s message of learning taking the direction of the social affecting the individual rather than the other way around. Most popular is his idea of the zone of proximal development, wherein you, with a superior knowledge or skill, can help me get to that level if my own skill appears to be close enough to a starting point that warrants a position in a particular zone of learning. I can write, after all, but someone has to do something about those isolated Caribbean island ideas, and those ponderous sentences begrudgingly ending in Utah.

But the zone of proximal development, still in terms of assuming responsibility for another, has a more powerful meaning. Most specifically, and think of this in the context of what Levinas has written, my teaching you something means that I am not waiting to make certain you are cognitively prepared for this instruction; I’m not waiting for you to raise your hand before I call upon you. To the contrary; for Vygotsky instruction *precedes* development. I am learning a skill from a man who clearly writes better than I, but I am also developing as a boy because of this instruction. I’m not sure
that Mr. Dreyfus “charised” me, but I am certain that Mr. Ellison “matured” me, developed me. In this regard, if I may be excused a moment of hyperbole, teaching may well be the only sacred art.

If the brain does contain all those schema as Jean Piaget (1967) called them, that are employed to make sense of and indeed construct reality, then writing surely is one of the ways we get in there under the hood of these schemata and tinker with every little gismo and mechanism. But no one should undertake this tinkering process without a good mechanic to tell him how to do it. Make a mistake, after all, and you literally can blow a gasket. No one goes in under the hood without the sense that a person somewhere is looking out for their work, taking responsibility for them. However it comes out, however I come out, it is going to be okay.

I reach the end of an essay I somehow dread concluding. It is as though the final word will represent my last goodbye to a beloved teacher. Which begs an important matter: namely, the charge of sentimentality in my recollections. Ought we not have a deeper context of recollections into which we might embed these sentiments? What really happened at that coke shop? What curriculum or devices, or strategies or outright tricks did this teacher employ with that kid who clearly was struggling with as yet undiagnosed learning disorders? If it seemed as though he worked magic, can we not get even a glimpse of that magic? Vivian Palley’s writings reveal magic, after all. So does the work of Nell Noddings.

Strange, isn’t it, how memory works, or fails to work? I have not a single recollection of a word Jack Ellison spoke, nor any pedagogic method he
employed. I can’t even remember if he brought books or a pad of paper to our meetings. All I have are the remnants of some sensations, the stuff, perhaps, of an ephemeral sense memory. Sentimental? Absolutely. Guilty, Your Honor. All that remains, actually, are the constituents of sentimentality: some attitudes, opinions, and some very tender emotions, all barely extant, ashes from a fire lit more than half a century ago. Even more, they seem to reside in a mysterious attic of my brain, accessible only through the act of writing. I can speak of them, of course, but when I do, I don’t feel that evocation we tend to label sentimental. Only in the writing do I feel the full wind blown force of nostalgia. Only in the writing do I feel myself transported to a most unlikely sanctuary: a coke shop on Clark Street. And yet, they remind one, perhaps, of the felt sense Vygotsky might have had in mind when he spoke of pedagogy preceding development. Maybe that’s what I meant when, in somewhat bloated language, I alleged that Mr. Ellison “matured” me. Surely these frail memories must speak to what Levinas has addressed.

When we speak of teachers helping young people find their voice, we mean at least two things. One is to aid the child in merely speaking out, believing in what they are holding in mind and sharing it with the world. A second meaning however, has to do with the internal operation required by the child to let his or her mind’s eye focus on and then make sense of feelings, emotions, sentiments, many of which will not be held aloft by the human voice. They may be sung, they may be danced or painted. But mainly they are written. Poetry, someone wrote, is crying expressed in words. And so I put forth for consideration, that if the discovery of one’s voice, in all its forms, requires the assistance of a guide, a teacher, then I am also advancing
the notion that the final product of the internal operations is often non-verbal expression. Which means, that in recalling these powerful experiences of years ago, it is only natural that in some instances we should encounter merely the remnants of emotions and sentiment.

Of course there was Mr. Ellison’s personality and wisdom, his speech patterns, his looks, his intellect, even his wardrobe. But the impact of those coke shop encounters is best described by these remnants of him that continue to reside within me in the form of intense feelings often emerging in writing, alas, as sentimentality. The predicate, after all, of my connection to him, was helping me with my writing, my thinking, my putting forth how I negotiated the world I shared with him, and the personal world for which each of us, ultimately alone, takes responsibility, This is Heidegger’s Eigenwelt, the world of the self thrown against itself. It is the world of consciousness and identity, Heidegger wrote. And while surely it consists of our biological inheritance and the sum of all our encounters, it consists as well of those mysterious operations in which we seek to gain even minimal understanding of who we might be and become. For this understanding, we need the sort of caring guide both Vygotsky and Levinas described, the guide who somehow finds his or her way in to our very souls. And if this isn’t magic, then what is? Even more, how does one experience it, much less proffer an accurate report of it?

So hopefully this explains why I cannot surrender the idea that as the writing goes, so goes fidelity, esteem, integrity, personal development, character. As the writing goes, so goes the way in which I construct reality for myself, not to mention the meanings I ascribe to this reality. As the writing goes, so goes
the chance that someday I may discover that I have found the terrain of the ethical and taken responsibility for the other, and hence I am *his* weight, as *he* is now mine. As the writing goes, so goes the idea that I have discovered that life or death locus of justice in the world my father insisted I know about. As the writing goes, so goes the writer, and his tutor, but only for eternity. And the debt remains, unpaid, exactly as Levinas described.

I have no difficulty remembering the sweet face of Jack Ellison. I can see his skin, and hair, and his eyes still, and wonder does this vivid memory approach what Levinas had in mind when he spoke of being held hostage by the gaze of another? How simple it seems to observe that some people see us, while others look right past us, completely avoiding our gaze. Still others appear to see through us. But some, thankfully, see into us, and by doing so, permit us to write our ideas for them, and for ourselves. Genuinely affirming us, and our periodic reports, run-on sentences notwithstanding, these are the ones who hold us hostage for eternity.

The author is Professor of Education at Boston University. Among his recent books are *When the Music Stopped, Discovering my Mother; A Sense of Self: The Work of Affirmation;* and *At Peril: Stories of Injustice.*