SEEKING LODGING AND THE BEST LIGHTS: THE CHALLENGE OF TEACHING
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Truth be told, while there are surgeons, lawyers, and teachers who take on the genuinely difficult cases of the world, my work as a university professor for the most part involves the easy cases. Surely my role as a professor in a great university is one of especial privilege. For years, our faculty, like so many other faculties, has witnessed the rising numbers in SAT scores, grade point averages, and class rankings of the young women and men who are selected for undergraduate programs. And we, the faculty, select the elite group of people for our graduate programs and faculty positions. Everything, essentially, is set up for success, theirs and ours. Granted, there are a few basement windowless classrooms on our campus one tries to avoid, the problems inherent in courses where freshmen sit alongside graduate students, and the eternal search for a just and valid grading rubric, but these are small prices to pay given the extraordinary resources available. Put it this way: Although I frequently grouse about pay levels, I have it pretty easy.

The more expensive price for me, and others, is that of teaching in a world gradually moving toward post literacy. Although I may be wrong, my impression, and lament, is that as the years go on, increasingly more students enter the realm Sven Birkerts called “electronic tribalism.” Simply put, I often find myself battling to preserve the arts of reading and writing, or more precisely the arts of reading and writing books. Come to think of it, even though everything seems to be about Internet searches, blogs, and power point presentations, the Internet is in the process of transforming much of what we normally consider to be democracy, or at least the way democracy might work. It is quite amazing really, for an old timer like myself to realize that this freedom of speech business is now going out to millions of people all over the world. You got a computer with internet connection, you got a voice, and listeners, lots of them. It’s a far cry from the few letters that might reach an author publishing a hard earned piece in an academic journal.

At my finger tips are spectacular libraries, IT and media experts, learning centers, urban and suburban educational facilities willing to offer students invaluable experiences, the freedom to engage in serious conversation and inquiry, not to mention generous colleagues who rarely decline an invitation to come in to one’s classes. is to have Everything, seemingly, is in place for exceptional learning, everything, that is, if, for even a few moments, the genuine challenge can be met, this of course, being, teaching itself.

The educator John Passmore proffered nine constructs of teaching which, to some degree, guide much of my own pedagogy. Passmore speaks of the development of capacities and mastering of material, teaching for the purpose of acquiring information, imparting or conveying information and ideas, the examination of the practical value of information and ideas, the cultivation of habits of the mind and heart, the cultivation of the
imagination, the establishment of just authority as well as safe and respectful classrooms, the appreciation of societies and cultures, and finally, the teaching of care and carefulness in our dealings with information, ideas, as well as one another.

Keeping all of these ideals in mind, along with a few curriculum ideas and lesson plans, makes this teaching enterprise more complex than many ever imagine. But it is that last challenge, the caring and careful work required of teachers, manifested in individual class preparation, classroom presentations and discussions, and perhaps most notably in the work with students around their reading and writing, that ought to cause us all to pause; there cannot be enough attention paid to these activities. Passmore’s insistence on care, moreover, puts one in mind of the notion of caritas. Based upon realistic judgments rather than illusions, appearances, and sentimentality, the idea, as Michael Novak writes, emerges as a just and realistic willing of the good of others. Caritas encourages us to act together in order to produce a culture, or in more limited terms, a classroom, of goodness and justice, what Pope John Paul II, when urging democratic nations to overcome materialism and consumerism, described as a "civilization of love." His words, not so incidentally, remind one of Acquinas’ notion of justice in the service of the common good.

In a word, caritas is to will the good of the other. It is the parent and teacher willing the good of the child and the student. But the idea demands that we remain careful—again that word— to think realistically. Thus, caritas is love aimed at the real, not the apparent, good of the other. Predicated on realistic judgments rather than illusions, appearances, and sentimentality, it is a conception of human nature, a conception of civilization, and for our particular concerns, a conception perfectly useful for creating an ethos in a classroom. In practical terms, caritas requires that we nourish, and cherish, voluntary cooperation. Our students must participate with us, not merely follow us, or comply with our, albeit, reasonable demands. Just as Passmore instructed, it requires respect for the human person as the originating source of human action, even action defined as classroom behavior and discussion. Central to its development is the agreement upon universal human rights that respect the dignity of the individual person. It probably requires that education never lose sight of what it is we believe democracy to be, and what we believe the rule of law to mean. And finally, caritas, as Novak writes, is built upon the presupposition that humans often fail in love, and only rare ones among us base all of our actions upon realistic love. Caritas, we remember, guides us in realistic, not necessarily utopian terms. It is a free society caritas seeks to establish; it is a free classroom it seek to perpetuate.

Combining the writing of Passmore with the ideas and ideals of caritas leads us directly to the notion of the role of social justice in our classrooms. Strange to think, isn’t it, that social justice might, at bottom, be understood as a specific social habit that we either honor or fail to honor everyday. First, there is the matter of specific skills. For example, are we inspiring those with whom we work, those whom we befriend as everyday we, together with our students, seek to accomplish a genuine work of justice? Admit it, these are actually rather elementary skills of civil society; they represent the primary skills of citizens of free societies, citizens of free classrooms. Simply stated, we ourselves do the
work that needs to be done.

Second, social justice aims at the good of the school, the community, the city, the country, the world. Life is not about the single agent, me, *numero uno*. What were those words written above the stage at the Francis W. Parker School: “A school should be a model home, a complete community, an embryonic democracy.” Clearly there were thinkers there before we arrived. If we hold that free persons are self-governing, that is, able to live by internalized rules or good habits, then they require only a fair and open system of rules in order to live well. Respecting the dignity of the individual person, at very least demonstrates a solidarity among all peoples. Moreover, in the free society, these rules enable people to act more creatively, intelligently, and productively than in any other form of society. And all of these words hold true for a marvelous classroom as well.

Finally, the notion of caritas proffers virtues that well may reside in each of our classrooms. First is the notion of cultural humility, an awareness that one needs the help of others, individuals and cultures, merely to perceive events and circumstances more clearly. Let us not forget that each of us stands under the judgment of the truth. Second, caritas suggests that we maintain respect for the regulative idea of truth, for within this framework people respect one another's fairness in reasoning and judgment and may submit opposing judgments to the light of evidence. This is not merely a note we write on our lesson plan; it is a virtue that we nourish, or ought to nourish as teachers. Third, if we honestly recognize the dignity of the human person before us and thousands of miles away from us, then we not only hold that each person is worthy of respect, we up hold the reality of human solidarity, and hence engender in others the virtue of social charity that makes each individual aware of belonging to the whole human race. And the result, well, quite possibly authentic prosperity now defined as the prosperity of the human mind, heart, and will. All forms of success, probably, depend upon sound habits of initiative, risk taking, creative imagination, and a practical talent for turning dreams into realities. Throw in the habits of trustworthiness, courtesy, reliability and cooperativeness, and if it doesn’t sound like an ideal to shoot for in a classroom, it sure sounds like the beginnings of an outline created for a graduation address.

Clearly, this is part and parcel of the teaching challenge, as is Lev Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development. We are reminded of Vygotsky’s teaching everyday when we comment to ourselves that with a little help from a teacher, or a classmate, that one student could make a noticeable jump in learning. We just need to take them up a notch so that they end up a little higher than where they commenced this morning. Vygotsky, of course, was thinking of more than merely the notion that teachers, adults generally, help children to grow. He was thinking of the power of the social world on the development of the individual mind. In fact what he was saying is that teachers cause children to mature and develop. His conception had it that instruction precedes development. Said simply, by urging and guiding students to learn, one actually enhances their intellectual as well as personal and cognitive development. We don’t merely wait for them to get “there;” our pedagogy *causes* them to get “there.” For the true direction of thought and language is not from the individual to the social, but from the social to the
individual. Schools indeed have the power to destroy children, just as they have the power to redeem them.

But where exactly, we might wonder, is “there?” Well, one “there” might be what Martha Nussbaum calls education’s primary roles, the so-called core values of self-examination and the ideal of a world citizen. All people, Nussbaum writes, are entitled to at least the capacity to understand the political economy that maps out their choices and opportunities, their medical concerns, the skills required to build advocacy groups, not to mention engage in acts of deferred gratification, as well as critique the politics of the day. As Amy Gutmann wrote, education must be play a role in people learning how to create cohesive communities and foster deliberative action. And fundamental to this vital role of citizenship is the skill of being able to argue with those with whom one totally disagrees.

Nussbaum has more for us. More than merely acknowledging her concern that a liberal democracy causes no harm to people and wherever possible, alleviates suffering, she looks to education to help students develop what she calls a “narrative imagination.” What a wonderful union of two words: The narrative speaks to the idea that people don’t merely have stories to tell, they are the stories they tell. Constantly we edit and rewrite these stories, and quite possibly call our constantly growing collection of stories our selves. And if Robert Nozick is correct, our selves are predicated on the idea that regularly, consistently, they will change, for the self dwells in its own capacity to change. In fact, we aim our selves at developing themselves. The beginnings, or the middles, or the endings will change, the arrangement of events and circumstances, perceptions and emotions will change, and eventually we will come to believe that we can, in the words of Viktor Frankl, become optimistic about our pasts, and not necessarily driven by an immutable destiny. People, in other words, ought to have the right to make decisions about their lives and even determine what is a good life. But for these activities, one needs teachers. That idea of a school being a complete community and embryonic democracy? It begins to make more sense. It also begins to seem that education cannot escape the defining structures of politics and ideology.

In the writings of Platt and Williams, for example, one learns that schools necessarily labor under ideological frameworks, frameworks arising from immediate circumstances as well as conceptions of past, present, and future social conditions. No, this thought has to be emended: It is the ideology that defines our conceptions of social conditions and underwrites our interpretations of strains. It is the ideology that guides our construction of grievances and provides the visions inherent in what Nussbaum called the narrative imagination. Put bluntly, without ideology we have but minimal perspective of our social and personal worlds, not to mention a paucity of ways of assessing these worlds. In justice, dignity, and freedom one recognizes the face of ideology.

Nothing about all of this should seem esoteric. Education rests as a counter force to unjust laws, conventions, and inequities of all varieties. Who but a teacher instructs us in the ways of properly conducting research on human merit, excellence, prejudice, self-interest, apathy, intelligence, individualism? Who but a teacher instructs us on the fundamental purposes and character of democracy? Who but a teacher instructs us on the
dynamics of social awareness, sensitivity to human differences, respect for norms, and
the ways one prepares oneself to become an active bone fide member of a civil society?
As one reads this glorious idea of Amy Gutmann’s, one simply has to think of the sheer
power of learning, teaching, studying, contemplating: There is a balance Gutmann
suggested, between living a good life according to one’s best lights, and being educated
as a democratic citizen with civic responsibility to make certain that others can lead a
good life according to their best lights. Does that not sum it up pretty well?

Teaching, in the minds of many, is actually a response to a calling, one that the
philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes not as willing oneself to take responsibility for
another, but rather the discovery that one already has taken responsibility for another.
Levinas alleges this act to be the most ethical of all human action. One doesn’t
necessarily seek this activity; it literally imposes itself, in this case, on the teacher whose
very sense of self is in great measure derived from the presence of his or her students, as
well as the work being studied.

Levinas’ writings seem especially relevant for teachers. He speaks, for example, of
people being “held hostage by the gaze” of another, an interaction that causes one to feel
they must now take responsibility for the other, the child, the student, for eternity. And,
while some readers may be put off by that word “hostage,” it means really a pledge for
lodging. That is, captured by the gaze of my student, I pledge him or her, or really,
discover that I have pledged to him or her safe lodging for eternity; on my watch they
will be safe. In this context, moreover, one might allege that the successful classroom is
the one in which teachers pledge safe lodging to students, if only for a few hours a week.

It is for Levinas, the gaze that essentially constitutes the domain of concrete existence. If
nothing else goes on in the classroom, at least I move toward my students, intellectually,
emotionally, empathically. I am defined, he writes, precisely because I am exposed to the
other. It is my inescapable answerability to the other that makes me an individual.
Levinas himself cites the words of Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov: “We are all
responsible for everyone else, but I am more responsible than all the others.” It is the
responsibility for the other that makes me human. And from Jacques Derrida: “We did
not choose this responsibility, it imposes itself upon us. . .(emphasis added)”

Let us hold in mind that this concept of responsibility is predicated not on reason, nor
even duty. It remains the rudimentary, although at the same time most profound ethical
act we can commit, or fail to commit; one’s very existence depends on this responsibility.
Granted, we all know that teachers require the presence of students merely to define
themselves as teachers. I regularly tell my students in large lecture courses that if I were
doing exactly what I presently am doing and you weren’t in this chamber with me, I
would immediately be carted off to a mental hospital; their presence defines my very
sanity. I cannot, therefore, become me, develop my own concept of self, without
acknowledging my students, and taking responsibility for them. And in this way, if we
just extend the thought, societies come to be formed, For in a sense societies are nothing
more than the gathering together of those who speak and listen, and ultimately discover
they have taken responsibility for one another, precisely as John Paul II had hoped.
So, in Levinas’s words, the classroom provides, or has the potential to provide a genuine life force generated by these eternal acts of responsibility taking, these sacred debts to one another whose very presence defines our own being and uniqueness, not to mention our most profound assessments of our selves. And have I mentioned that absent this obligation to assume responsibility for the other and thereby affirm him or her, there can be no hope for establishing genuinely just schools, or societies? “In his face,” Levinas intones, “the Other appears to me not as an obstacle, nor as a menace I evaluate, but as what measures me.” In the end, apparently, the act of affirmation is intended for both of us, student and teacher alike, As I affirm your self, I discover I have affirmed my own as well. In the act of affirmation, the sacrifice I make for the other liberates both of us.

What seems to matter here is the receptivity of the teacher to human stimuli which has been made possible by the act of affirming the student. My self must be “open,” vulnerable, not just to the student, but to the reverberations in itself that it experiences as a function of encountering the student. In genuine affirmation, and in what Levinas called “sensibility” we find ourselves able to respond to the student. On the very first day of school, in the very first minutes of the new academic year, we are able to feel the stimulation and sense of being roused by the student even without ever having previously known anything about that student. We are merely responding to his or her summoning of our moral obligation to take responsibility for him or her, and thereby create the genuinely just relationship, the genuinely just classroom. Oh, we remain forever free to refuse the student, reject the gaze, but we will live forever, Levinas cautions, with a bad conscience; our chance to create the virtuous classroom will have passed.

I teach truly admirable young women and men at Boston University. They come to our school because they wish to be become teachers, counselors, coaches, and administrators. It is not melodramatic to assert that their work will affect the lives of literally thousands of young people, and that they will be dealing with matters of life and death. Schools, after all, can destroy children as well as redeem them. Let us recall Gutmann’s words regarding children and their best lights. Thus, my small involvement with students offers an opportunity for all of us to nudge a culture, however minimally, in one direction or another. This too, constitutes part of the challenge of teaching, along with attempts to elevate standards, develop taste and discrimination, foster style, and even beauty, and stimulate curiosity and wonder, as Israel Scheffler asserted. Then there is that matter of constantly reminding oneself that good talking does not automatically constitute good teaching.

I have long known that I teach in part as repayment to my teachers of The Francis W. Parker School in Chicago. From kindergarten through high school, a host of extraordinary people taught a boy with undiagnosed dyslexia to read and write. Their teaching never completely extinguished that child’s self doubt, but it significantly diminished it, and in the process taught the boy the value of thoughtful inquiry, great books, the role of a person in his her or her culture, the essential capacity to reflect on oneself and one’s environment, and the value of the narrative imagination. Their teaching, moreover, apparently convinced the boy that he himself might just have a few
good lights. So perhaps someone, or someone’s, may have been captured by his albeit anxious gaze.

To say that because of those people I determined to become a teacher would be untruthful, but I know that what those teachers did saved my life. What they did confirmed the notion that teaching is a caring and sacred act, and when done well, a genuinely ethical one as well. And from this fact I later on determined that should I ever become a teacher I would never seek tenure because I had to leave open the option to be fired once my role in the classroom was deemed inadequate. (Who knows, perhaps memory isn’t the first thing to go; perhaps it is the ability to be held hostage by the gaze.) This too, is for me part of the acceptance of the challenge to become, and remain, a teacher. But who needs tenure when you have Levinas, Gutmann, Derrida, Novak, Nussbaum, Nozick, Passmore, not to mention the Pope as friends! And students.

REFERENCES

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