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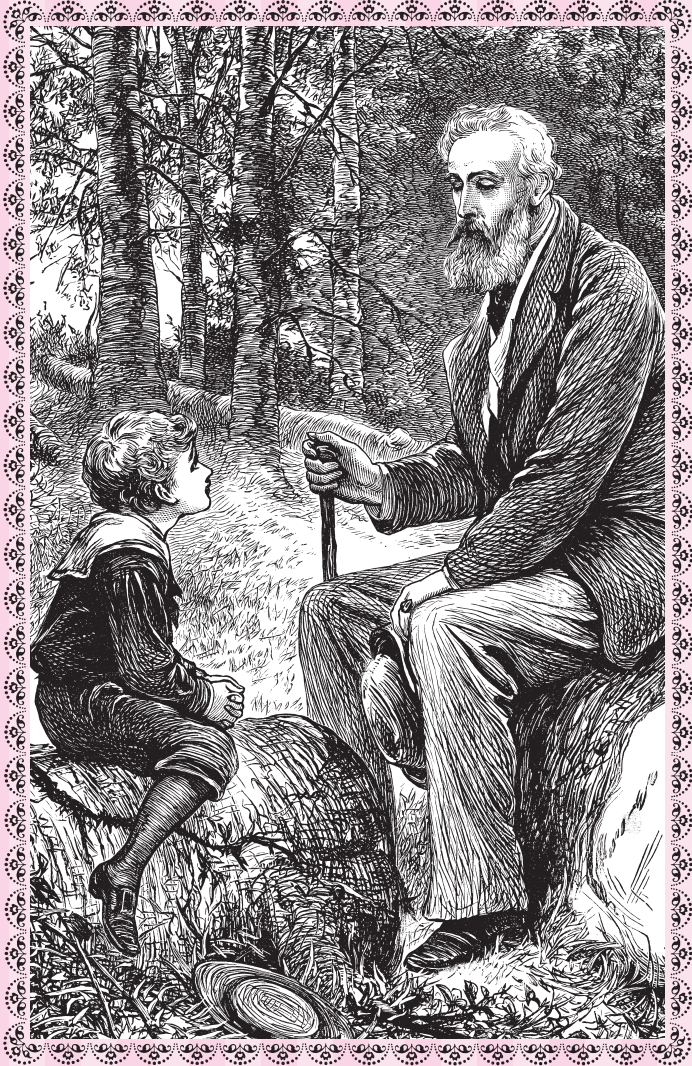
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I CAN SEE HIM

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Introduction

WHAT IS THIS THING
CALLED TEACHING?

Joseph Leininger Wheeler

The telephone rang . . . and our daughter's voice was on the line. After small talk we moved on to what was uppermost on her mind: how and when to begin educating their two boys, Taylor (four) and Seth (one). Should they consider preschool before kindergarten? There are so many options to consider: regular public school, charter schools, Christian schools, and homeschooling. Which ones would be worthy of their trust? When should they start Taylor? They certainly didn't want to shortchange him. Could he get quality education in Christian schools? Could he get the right kind of instruction in values at charter or public

schools? All these questions spilled out pell-mell, one after another, in almost a torrent.

Later on that morning, I asked some young women in a dental office if they felt our daughter's concerns were typical of most young women. They nodded their heads and declared, "We *all* share her concerns. We've *all* worried about such decisions. How is a parent to know?"

One of the things I said to our daughter was this: "The single most important thing to look for is passion. Is the teacher passionate about learning and life?" Later on, thinking back to this collection of teacher stories, it came to me that this incredibly complex thing we label "education" is not nearly as forbidding as we tend to make it. If we cut through all the academic mumbo jumbo to the distilled essence, education is merely a caring teacher sharing his knowledge with a willing student. An old saying reiterates this definition of education:

*A student seated on one end of the log,
and Mark Hopkins¹ seated on the other.*

MY OWN JOURNEY

Several years into college, I began to stumble into the teaching profession. My parents were teachers, ergo I could become one too. Whatever I didn't yet know about teaching I'd learn in my education classes and in my student teaching.

Wrong.

Education classes could no more make a teacher of me than psychology books could show me how to fall in love. And student teaching didn't help either. My supervising teacher appar-

¹*Famed American educator, 1802–1877*

ently did not know how to teach—or even to arouse enthusiasm in his pupils. No deader classes have I ever experienced.

About fifteen months later, the last student shut the classroom door and took his seat, the class bell rang, and I was face-to-face with this thing called teaching. I got by that first day by asking the students about themselves and their interests. And I told them about mine. Then I gave them an assignment.

But the next day came the moment of truth: In spite of all those years of college course work, I still did not know how to teach.



It was years later before I fully realized that I was anything but alone in this feeling of unpreparedness. And it was many years more before I felt good about my teaching. Good—just that, no more—for, in teaching, one *never arrives*. It is the most inexact of all sciences, with the possible exception of parenting: Not until our children are grown do we learn what parenting is. Our first child proves very little, for each later child teaches us that what worked for one will not necessarily work for another. If we have five children, we are left at the end not with one well-proven philosophy of raising children—but with five.

The same is true with teaching.

So now, over forty years later (thirty-four of those in the classroom), I have a clearer picture of what it means to be a teacher. Let me share some of these hard-earned lessons and conclusions.

First of all, let's tackle two misperceptions about the educational process:

The first one has to do with testing, which supposedly will confirm my success or failure as a teacher. It didn't take long for

me to have real doubts about this premise, for my students apparently had sieve-like brains and forgot what they had “learned” at a dismaying speed. But I was almost to the end of my teaching career before I learned the awful truth. The top information literacy specialist in America addressed our college faculty one never-to-be-forgotten day and asked us all this question: “Let’s say you are giving a test tomorrow. One week from tomorrow, how much will your students remember of what they know tomorrow?” When she asked us to guess the answer, not one of us was even close! *The top student in your class will have forgotten a minimum of 82 percent by the end of that first week. The rest of the class will have forgotten even more. And it’s all downhill from there.*

So we were confronted with the unthinkable: If what students “learn” cannot be retained for even one week, how do we evaluate the effectiveness of our teaching?

The second is one of the chief misperceptions in academia today. Simply put, it is the assumption that grade point average determines one’s destiny. It supposedly reflects how well you will do in standardized testing, shows what caliber of college or university will accept you, and determines whether or not you will succeed outside the traditional classroom.

Bilgewater!

If this were true, why are so many homeschoolers being accepted by the most elite universities? Why are so many straight-A graduates working for C-plus bosses? Why do so many four-pointers have such difficulty relating to people? Belatedly, many discover that, while they may have mastered content regurgitation, by ignoring the opportunities for growth and leadership in student association, musical groups, clubs, publications, tutoring, study-travel abroad, service organizations, etc., their social skills failed to grow. Thus they never became what they could

have been, and they missed out on making the deepest and longest-lasting friendships life brings us.

Not that high grades and effective study skills aren't desirable, for they are. And the mind ought to be so cultivated. Nevertheless, we must never forget that we ought to be educating the whole person, not just the ability to remember long enough to pass tests.

Even IQ is overrated. All too often it proves a liability to be so intelligent you can ace exams without bothering to study. Many of these brilliant ones coast so much of the time that they are intellectually flabby by the time they graduate. Never having had to struggle for anything, a surprisingly large number of them are passed up by the plodders. For success is not to be found in mere pyrotechnics but in long-term, day-in, day-out sustaining.

So it is that even students who earn mediocre grades have the potential to make a success of the rest of their lives. To rise, in fact, to the very pinnacle of human achievement. And students who excel in their classwork may also succeed in the real world if they will also develop their nonacademic talents, skills, and graces.

So what does all this mean in terms of the teaching profession?

Well, it means that we will have to look outside testing and grade point average for answers. As for myself, it was amazing how many answers I found in these stories of unforgettable teachers.

For one thing, it's obvious that early teacher evaluations mean little. Young people are no more capable of differentiating between a real teacher and a pseudo one than children are capable of judging how wise or effective their parents are. True wisdom comes only with the years, in the biblical "fullness of time." With the passing of the years comes a reevaluation of our

teachers. While young, we give our kudos, adulation, and year-book dedications to those who please us most, cater to us, placate us, and smooth our paths. But the ones who care about us enough to be tough, to challenge, to expect nothing but our best, and are willing to wait for appreciation until the battering of the years re-sorts our priorities—these are the great ones.

UNFORGETTABLE

One of Nat King Cole’s most beloved songs bears this title. What qualities are likely to make a teacher “unforgettable”? (In a good sense, that is. For it is said that “no one is ever completely useless—you can always serve as a horrible example.”) Great teachers tend to be known for certain qualities, qualities each of us could develop if only we cared enough.

PASSION AND COMPETENCE

Almost never is a teacher fondly remembered who lacks enthusiasm and passion. A man or woman who is in love with life and learning is an exciting person to be around. It’s almost impossible to avoid being infected by such a spirit. When compared to the instructor who merely does what he or she is paid to do (show up at scheduled classes and appointments, explain the subject matter, test, and grade), it is no contest. One has a force field, the other does not. One is the stuff of anecdotes and legend, the other of yawns and shaken watches.

I have never forgotten a statement I heard years ago at a teaching convention: “There is only one unforgivable sin in teaching—and that is to bore your students.”

The speaker did not mean that teachers had to be slapstick comedians, but rather that they ought not only to be interesting

to listen to but also to be known for substance. There is a principle at stake here: I can steal just as surely by snatching away a person's time as by stealing possessions. I cringe when I see a public speaker rambling. Not to be prepared, not to know what he is going to say, is a theft of our most priceless and irreplaceable possession—time. The same is true for teachers: *Every teacher* ought to err on the side of overpreparation, knowing ahead of time what she is going to say. How the class is to be kept interesting and meaningful, how it will help to prepare students for life itself. At the end of a given class, each student ought to feel that his tuition money was well spent and that he gained new insights into life.

Ironically, the only area I know of where people seem overjoyed at not getting their money's worth is education: "Miss a school day? Hooray! Teacher sick? Wonderful!" Nevertheless, a teacher who consistently shortchanges students will be remembered in later years—but not fondly.

Students ridicule teachers who are unprepared. They do not expect their teachers to know *all* the answers, but they expect competence. They will throng to the teacher who brings joy and excitement to each class. Laziness in teaching repels them. Students mock teachers who merely recycle class notes, lectures, and tests. Even fellow teachers soon learn which instructors are laughingstocks because students are collecting their old tests and getting A's without having to learn the material.

No teacher unworthy of respect will ever be considered great. Students are in full agreement with the old aphorism "What you are roars so loudly in my ears, I can't hear what you say."

Only when the walk and the talk are synchronized can there be respect. Students can smell a fake a mile off. And they deeply resent being pandered to.

FELLOW LEARNERS

Great teachers do not pontificate but rather consider themselves fellow learners. Oliver Wendell Holmes postulated that the teacher should not speak *at* students, from the front of the room, but rather *with* the students, facing the same direction they do.

Students love to study with teachers who are continually learning themselves. How well I remember Dr. Paul Quimby, an eminent scholar of Far East history. One of the part-time jobs I held in college was to wash pots and pans in the cafeteria each morning. When I went to work at 5 A.M., I could count on seeing a light on in Dr. Quimby's office. Even with his vast knowledge of his subject matter, he never considered it enough. What an inspiration that was for me as a fledgling history student! By example, he taught me that learning must be both continuous and lifelong. It is for this reason that all of my classes tend to be taught with the chairs arranged in a circle—this way no one is minimized or left out, and the teacher is on level, approachable ground, as a fellow learner.

LOVE

But having stirred in this characteristic and that, this quality and that, there remains one magical factor in the mix without which no teacher can ever achieve greatness. And that is, quite simply, *love*. Sooner or later, after all the nuts and bolts of teaching are sorted out, after the craft of teaching has been honed, there will come a time when the teacher must make a crucial decision: whether or not to really love each student. This is the toughest decision a teacher can ever make, for once it is made, life will never be the same. It is far, far easier just to patter on about content than to invest lifeblood in one's students. To take the

trouble to *really* get to know each student—to search out the hidden dreams, the inner torment rarely revealed to anyone, the sources of joy and meaning—that is a tall order indeed!

It is impossible to fake love successfully. The eyes do not lie. If you are sincere, love will permeate every word you write, every look you give, everything you say, and thus each student will *know* that here is true love, as unconditional and permanent as the everlasting hills. It means being there for each student as long as life shall last. And each student will drain one's energy reserves, much as was true when Christ stopped in midjourney, turned around, and asked of the vast crowd of people who were jostling Him the seemingly ridiculous question, "Who touched Me?" Someone there wanted more than a mere touch, and Christ sensed that need instantly.

In today's litigious society, we have reached the point where it is dangerous even to touch another human being. Given the fact that each of us is said to need eight hugs a day in order to remain sane, not to touch, not to hug, is a recipe for disaster. I have always hugged. So has my family. I really don't know how I could effectively communicate love without it.

Teaching unstrengthened by the divine will inevitably fall short. Since God is the ultimate source of all true love, those who are not connected with Him will be little more than hollow drums. *With* that relationship with God, it won't be necessary to preach a creed; every word, every act, every glance, every nuance will give away the truth.

Second only to love, and a by-product of it, is *kindness*, perhaps the single most significant character trait in the universe. If a teacher is not kind, the best thing he or she can do is to flee the classroom and never darken its door again! And with kindness comes empathy, the key to understanding and relating to our students.

With love and kindness comes a willingness to mentor. It is said that we learn more from our mentors than from all of our textbooks combined. Mentoring relationships can be official or unofficial. Each day, people watch us and are impacted by what we say, write, or do—whether or not we’re aware of it. But official, conscious mentoring is a higher art and can easily be abused. A true mentor will resist the devotee’s tendency to idolize or clone and will instead search out and emphasize the mentoree’s unique strengths and skills. A true mentor’s motives will always be selfless, realizing that real success occurs only when the mentoree has moved on to self-sufficiency and has begun to mentor others.

You never know when your words will be transformed into life-changing epiphanies. Case in point: Back in the 1960s I was taking English classes, one at a time, at Sacramento State University. One particular day, as I was walking past my advisor’s office, I was startled to hear him call out, “Joe! Got a minute?”

I answered in the affirmative, went in, and took a seat. After some small talk, he asked me a rather strange question: “Joe, what are you doing here?”

I sputtered that I was taking English classes.

“Why?”

“Oh, so I can complete my undergraduate major. I graduated with a major in history, but only a minor in English.”

“Do you realize you’re already halfway to a master’s in English?”

I had not realized. Dr. Victor Comerchero’s unsolicited question changed the course of my life, setting in motion events that propelled me out of secondary teaching and into the college level, laying the stage for my doctorate and for all the scholarship

that followed—all because he cared. Teachers have this power—if they will but use it.

NEW BEGINNINGS

One serendipity about teaching is that each day you are given the opportunity to make a new beginning. When I come home burdened by the conviction that I failed in that day's classes, I can determine that tomorrow's will be better. If a semester or a year ends poorly, I can turn things around before I begin another.

The stories that follow offer each of us the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of our protagonists. Beginning teachers can thus avoid many mistakes, and veteran teachers can gain new insights into qualities that make a teacher unforgettable.

In these stories we learn that it is not new buildings, computers, and state-of-the-art visual and audio equipment that result in great teaching. Perhaps Frances Hungerford (in Walworth's story "A Woman to Warm Your Heart By") put it best:

You see, all I had was love.

ABOUT THIS COLLECTION

Since I have been a teacher myself for thirty-four years, I have taken great joy in including wonderful teacher stories in our many story anthologies over the years. When my editor at Tyndale asked me to put together a collection of the most memorable teaching stories I had ever read, I started by making copies of those I had anthologized over the years, then stirred into the mix the best of those I had yet to include in a collection. The final test came when I reread all of them, pretending I was reading each one for the very first time. Which ones had the most power? Which ones moved me most deeply? As a result,

INTRODUCTION

twelve of my previously anthologized teacher stories made the cut, and twelve new ones displaced the others.

Featured in this collection are such luminaries as Arthur Gordon, Josephine DeFord Terrill, Dorothy Walworth, Fulton Oursler, Jr., and Russell Gordon Carter.



THE
BEGINNING

Arthur Gordon

Parents are our first teachers and the ones who care most about us. But sooner or later there comes a time when those first teachers must step aside. But even when they do, they agonize, wondering if they made the right decision.

The September morning was calm and bright. The town looked fresh and shining and very American. We drove slowly through the gilded streets, not saying anything.

Sherry sat beside me, scrubbed and solemn. We had decided, her mother and I, not to make anything momentous of this first day at school. I was to drop her there and drive on. She knew which classroom was hers. We had all inspected it the week before.

Symbolically, perhaps, the school was on a hill. A flight of steps rose from the street, bisecting the green lawn, arrowing straight to the wide door centered in the red-brick Colonial building. A public school. A good one, so they said.

Already a trickle of small humanity was flowing up the steps. It was easy to spot the first-graders. Most of them were anchored to their mothers' hands. I glanced at Sherry. She was staring at her lap.

"We're a little early," I said. "Want to sit here for a couple of minutes?"

She nodded. I leaned forward and cut the ignition. I had not expected to feel anything, but now I felt a queer breathlessness, as if I were waiting for something important to happen.

Sherry smoothed her dress carefully over her knees. The part in her hair looked very straight and white. *What is she thinking?* I asked myself suddenly. *What goes on inside that bright, new, untouched mind? Does she know what it means, this first step on the endless ladder of education? Does she have any idea? Of course she doesn't,* I told myself impatiently. *If she did, she'd probably jump out of the car and run away. How many years of classrooms? Twelve, at least. Sixteen, if she goes to college. More, if she goes on to graduate school or gets specialized training.*

I gripped the wheel tighter, thinking of all the unknown

individuals who would try to teach this child and in trying would leave some mark, however tiny, on her mind or her heart. Frightening, somehow. Terrifying, almost.

Sherry lifted one foot and examined the scissor scratches on the sole of her new shoe. *They will explain the physical world to you, I thought. They may show you how to blueprint the atom. They may give you a map of the spiral nebulae. But who will help you know yourself? Who will teach you to chart your own emotions? Who will offer you a guide to the frail complexities of the human spirit? Nobody, nobody. . . .*

Try to learn their facts, I said to Sherry in my mind, but don't worry too much if you can't. You'll forget most of them anyway, sooner or later. I memorized the quadratic formula once, and read all the plays of Molière in the original. What earthly good it did me I still don't know. The things that matter you won't learn from any blackboard. That I can promise you.

A knot of small male animals went by, full of raucous high spirits. *There go your real teachers, Sherry, I said to her silently. Take a good look at them, your contemporaries. They will teach you many things that are not in any schoolbooks. Unpleasant things sometimes. How to lie, how to cheat, goodness knows what else. . . .*

Maybe you have to learn those things before you can also learn that ultimately they're not worth doing. I don't know. I'm your father, and you think I know everything, but you're wrong. All I really know is that I don't know much—and when you make that discovery about yourself someday, why then the first part of your education will be complete.

But they won't teach you that in school, either. If they did, much of the importance of what they're doing with all their chalk and books and rulers would melt away, and that would never do.

The happy savages went whooping up the steps. Sherry watched them, and I watched Sherry. *Five minutes from now, I*

thought, *you won't be just you anymore. You'll also be one of them. It may be the biggest step you'll ever take. I hope it's in the right direction.*

I looked at the school high on the hill and the open door with the little figures going into it, and a clammy doubt seized me, a doubt as to the ultimate wisdom of pouring these young lives into such a mold, however good, however well intentioned. Conformity, regimentation, the desire not to be different but to be as much like everyone else as possible—was this *really* the way to develop independence, originality, leadership?

No such school system existed when our country was born. Yet consider the genius that blazed forth in those days. Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Hamilton, John Marshall, Patrick Henry—all these and many more from a tiny nation of barely three million souls. Now we number 200 million, and schools and colleges cover the land. But where are the leaders, where are the men?

I glanced again at the child beside me. *Maybe it doesn't matter, I thought. Maybe the pattern is already set. Maybe the seeds of personality are already planted and nothing can alter the way they will grow. Maybe—I don't know. One more thing I don't know.*

Anyway, I said to myself, the time has come. Open that tight parental hand and let her go. It's her life, remember, not yours.

I reached across her and opened the door. She got out slowly and stood with her back to me, looking up at the building on the hill. Now I was supposed to drive nonchalantly away.

“So long, Sherry,” I said.

She turned her head, and suddenly that wonderful flood of love and humor came up behind her eyes.

“Don't be scared, Daddy,” she said. “I'll be back.” And she went climbing up into the blue infinity of the morning.

Arthur Gordon

Arthur Gordon
(1912–2002)

During his long and memorable career, Arthur Gordon edited such magazines as *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Guideposts*. He was the author of a number of books, including *Reprisal* (1950), *Norman Vincent Peale: Minister to Millions* (1958), *A Touch of Wonder* (1983), and *Return to Wonder* (1996), as well as several hundred short stories.