

## THE AMAZING GRACE OF TEACHING

### Abstract

Drawing on selected sacred texts and the wisdom of sages, this paper probes the spiritual dimensions of why we teach. The presentation flows from my ongoing work of probing why people feel called to teach. Particular attention is paid to two aspects of responding to that call: teaching morally, and facing multiple vulnerabilities. Special consideration is given to the challenges and possibilities of teaching. Reference is made to my recently published book, *The Teacher's Calling*.

### Introduction

Have you ever asked yourself, "Why am I doing this?" as you prepared to meet your class? If you have, you are like most teachers. From time to time, we get bogged down with the sameness of a routine or feel drained from putting so much energy into preparing and presenting classes that are interesting as well as informative. We may feel as though our creative energies are exhausted. In fact, we may feel that we are getting physically exhausted from the experience. And yet we keep at it because every now and then we see that our students "grow and glow" in the process of being taught. Every now and then we have the experience of realising that we are engaged in something wonderful, and that insight itself is enough to sustain us and "makes it all worthwhile." Why is this so?

In the Talmud we read, "*Much have I learned from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but most from my students.*" (Ta'anith, 7b) In an article published in the *New York Times* (August 18, 2002), Mark Edmundson suggests that virtually all of us teachers got into the profession because we have been inspired by a great teacher. Yet, Edmundson, the author of *Teacher*, recently published by Random House, suggests that those who think about their own inspiring teachers are apt to wonder how they would have felt about the current consumer-oriented, test-obsessed state of learning. He ends his essay by suggesting that those of us who so reflect "will begin to fight, humanely and generously, against anything that stands in the way of our students' true growth – and our own."

This requires spiritual energy, I believe. Let's be honest. Teaching *is* difficult. It has always been so. Centuries ago, the author of the Book of Isaiah wrote:

*You will indeed listen but never understand,  
And you will indeed look, but never perceive.*

*For this people's heart has grown dull,  
And their ears are hard of hearing,  
And they have shut their eyes so that they  
might not look with their eyes,  
And listen with their ears,  
And understand with their hearts and turn  
– and I would heal them*

Does this passage seem to describe the occasional response of your students? If so, you are not alone. However, once we truly recognise that teaching is difficult, we can accept that fact, and what will really matter is that we still wish to teach because we enjoy it.

### The Teacher's Calling

There is something mysterious and fascinating about teaching. The longer we do it, the more we become aware that we can never fully know our students or the subjects we teach. The more we think about them, the more clearly we see the limits of our understanding. This insight has been called the "learned uncertainty of teachers." My own experience of teaching has taught me, however, that there is at the same time a deepening awareness that there is much that we do know about this mysterious activity. For example, we become more convinced that stories, texts and common human experience have something to teach us, and that even though their meanings appear to be inexhaustible, their interpretations can be discerned. Our passion for teaching compels us to discern which interpretations really are better than others, and which can help us and our students to become more fully human. In other words, we grow in our conviction that what we do when we teach really does matter. Such insights can help to refresh our courage and enhance our joy.

There are some questions about teaching that are not easily answered. For example when did we first know that we wanted to be a teacher; was it a decision we came to quickly, or did it emerge gradually over time? Perhaps we still wonder why we are teaching, or why we are still teaching. Such

questions usually are pondered over for years. They are not simply questions about our job, although they include related issues: they are questions about our soul's life and work. For this reason, teaching cannot merely be treated as a routine job because it flows from an inner incentive. Teaching is more a vocation than a job, and it is much easier to change jobs than it is to switch vocations. Perhaps that is why many of us have taught several different grade levels, subjects, and students in a variety of settings. Through the diversity of our teaching experience we have probably realised that our vocation is expressed over time. In fact, we may teach for years before we genuinely begin to feel it as a vocation and treat it as such. It takes a while for us to realise just how much our work embodies our vision of teaching and our beliefs about students. We grow to understand that teaching is a calling that makes claims on our souls.

There has been a great deal of research that shows that many people enter teaching for idealistic reasons. They want to work with youth, to have a positive influence on others and to pass on what they know and care about. Research also shows that successful teachers conceive their work in broader terms than in the simple accomplishment of a function. Otherwise it is easy to give into the temptation to just 'cover' the material mechanically, to accept low expectations of one's students or to abandon society's expectations and just do what one pleases.

***Teaching is not simply a profession.*** As most teachers soon discover, there has been a long struggle in the professional world to gain respect for teaching. Professions are recognised by *outside* criteria. Standards of qualification, performance and evaluation are established by professional organisations and institutions to assist in the selection of appropriate candidates for teaching positions. But there is an important difference between "profession" and "vocation." People can conduct themselves professionally but not consider their work a calling. Those who regard teaching as a vocation derive their identity from an inner motivation that allows them shape their roles rather than merely occupy them. Also, the notion of profession stresses public recognition, greater autonomy and larger rewards, whereas vocation focuses inward to the core of the practice itself. The sense of vocation, then, finds expression at the crossroad of public obligation and personal fulfilment. But vocation cannot exist as a state of mind alone.

***Vocation presumes a sense of adventure to engage the world.*** Teaching as a vocation presumes a hopeful, outward looking attitude of devoting oneself to the activities that stem from the "inner

urge" to venture out and devote oneself to working in a firsthand way. In other words, a sense of adventure with all of its unpredictability and uncertainty is inherent in the notion of teaching as a vocation. Somehow, to teach requires that we jump in with gusto, eager to begin again, even with some measure of panic! To devote oneself to teaching is to be true to one of the original meanings of the term vocation that is, "to commit oneself in an enduring way to a particular practice." (Hansen, 1995, p. 6).

***Teaching is more than selfless devotion.*** To say that teaching is a vocation might conjure up notions of asceticism or other associations with Christian belief and practice. Some of these ideas are from early Christianity, but they were modified during the Reformation that began in the sixteenth century. Vocation came to express a secular calling, one into which one was born and which was to be carried out in a spirit of service to Christian and ethical aims. Puritans, for example, distinguished between a "general" and a "particular" calling. A "general" calling meant being called a Christian way of life regardless of one's secular occupation. The "particular" vocation was the specific activity in which one worked.

Today, some teachers also distinguish between a general and particular call. For example, one can separate the feeling of being called to teach from a desire to teach a particular subject or age level of students. That is, one can separate the desire, "I want to be a teacher," from "I want to teach primary school reading," or "I want to teach high school religion." Some of us soon discover that strictly occupational language is inadequate for describing why we teach, and we may find ourselves using language with spiritual overtones so that we feel compelled to speak of our hopes for our students and our faith in their future. We tend to self-describe what we do, not so much in language of self-denial, but in the language of creativity, engagement, imagination and transformation

***Teaching is always more than a personal matter.*** Our inner motivations are important, but they are only a part of the story of teaching. One cannot simply "have a vocation" in the abstract. Rather, it is a set of impulses that are outward-moving, focused on what is calling one to act. The idea of teaching as a vocation presumes a social reality in which to work out the inner desire to contribute to the transformation of the world. The teacher is "called" by the practice. We teach for the good of the community.

***A teacher's calling is active and compelling.*** The practice of teaching is a social event. If a person

felt called to teach but had no place or means to teach, the call would remain fruitless. We can respond to the call to teach because there is a practice of teaching with requirements and responsibilities. The response to the call to teach is not simply a passive event. Something about teaching is larger than the person, something that whets the appetite, captures the imagination, makes one desire to do something. The source of that call is not just *within* the person, but it usually is sparked by one's own teachers, experiences of working with youngsters in an educational capacity, or through the modelling of acquaintances who are teachers. The response to the call is sparked from *without*. Person and practice are interdependent much like public service and personal fulfilment.

***Each teacher's vocation is unique.*** Even though there are common threads in the calling of each teacher, each teacher dwells in the role in a unique way. We each give our vocation a distinctive personal stamp. The one who occupies the role of teacher makes all the difference. If we can see ourselves as non-interchangeable with others, we can enrich what we do with more significance. We are more like architects than labourers, more like artists than mechanics. We not only strive to gain the skills necessary to do our work, but we strive to know better those for whom we do it. Our work is a common work that we do in a unique way.

Teaching has an old English root, *taecan*, which means to share, to instruct, or more literally, to provide signs or outward expression of something one knows. Such teaching is a form of public service to others, and at the same time it provides a person with a sense of identity and personal fulfilment. Such teaching is a vocation.

### **Knowing How**

Can a person be taught how to teach? Are good teachers "born," not made? Studies of model teachers have shown that sound instructional methods are necessary in teaching. Teaching without good methodology, without an understanding of what you are and what you can do, is like "trying to paint without a brush and colours." You need more than technique to be an artist; you need vision. "Technique" or method can be described as a way of "doing" reality. This "doing" flows from a way of "seeing" reality. The teacher is one who brings a particular vision of the world to share with the students.

There are various perspectives about education. It can be regarded as a process of initiating young people into the ways of thinking and behaving characteristic of the culture into which they were born. In another perspective, it is the development

of a person from innocence to experience, from the limitations of childish immediacies to the open possibilities of conceptual thought. In yet another, it is the effort of a community to recreate itself with the rise of each new generation and to perpetuate itself in historic time (Greene, 1978, p. 3).

No matter how a teacher regards education, the primary task is to teach the young how to know. Schools have traditionally been understood as places where knowledge is transmitted, where children are exposed to views of the world accepted by their culture and where beliefs and truth are taught. But students are more than "human resources" for greater productivity and economic gain. They come to us with questions and frustrations, dreams and anxieties, hopes and fears. Some are restless; others appear blank. We find ourselves daring them to break with their given views, that which is taken-for-granted – to move towards what might be, what is not yet, what is possible. How can our methods serve such a purpose? One thing is clear. No matter how polished a method is it will accomplish nothing without someone who uses it; one who is just as active, interesting, engaged and curious about the reasoning behind a method as about the steps it contains.

Our sense of vocation brings methods of teaching to life and renders them in the service of life. Methodology is not just a way to socialise students into a way of life, keep them under control, or pass along information. Knowing the subject matter well is also not enough to guarantee effective teaching. A teacher's sense of vocation is related to his or her commitment towards intellectual self-improvement and subsequently of one's students. Vocation without skill is ineffective, but skills without a sense of service could be superficial.

### **Passion for the Possible**

How are we to serve our students in their quest for a meaningful life? How can we provide the means for them to live in peace amidst diversity? The world is broken in so many places with shattered communities and lives. For starters, we can believe that it is possible to move the young from what is to what is not yet. Such belief requires a good measure of passion. Passion has been called *the power of possibility*. This is so because it is the source of our interests and our purposes that signifies mood, emotion, desire: modes of grasping the appearance of things. It is a way of recognising possibility, "the presence of the future as that which is lacking and that which, by its very absence, reveals reality." (Sartre, 1968, p. 94). We need to nourish our own sense of the possibility. A good place to begin is to reflect on our own attitude towards taking risks.

Are we willing to try something new, to experiment, to try out a new idea? Or are we more prone to choose what has worked for us before, or something that others have already done? Do we need to have control more than adventure? Some writers on education contrast *objective knowledge* with *primitive knowledge*. In objective knowledge we try to own and control reality, and by so doing we turn everything, including nature and human beings, into objective things.

Primitive knowledge is based on feeling, intuition and faith. Formal education in our culture largely portrays the self as *knower* and the world as known. Knowledge is derived from “facts” and the process of education consists in “finding the facts.” Such a separation of knower and known, learner and the material to be learned, is now seriously questioned. Philosophers of science, for example, suggest that every scientific finding is a mixture of the objective and subjective. In other words, the very notion of truth is being refined. Parker Palmer points out that the word truth is derived from a German root that gives rise to our word *troth*, as in the ancient vow “I pledge my troth.” He says, “with this word one person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks.” (Palmer, 1983, p. 31). If we shape our classroom by this understanding of truth, we can gather facts, share knowledge, and test different interpretations against one another. The conflicts that will result will allow a fuller knowledge to come out. The classroom is formed by the truth that emerges from the interdependence of the knowers and the subject matter.

When we regard teaching as a “dance” between the knowers and the material, it is easier to rethink our own roles. First, it becomes clearer that we are to create a space in which truth is neither suppressed nor merely accepted. The focus is not on constant answers but rather on adventure, wrestling with untruth, silence and listening. Palmer calls this atmosphere **hospitality**, “where everyone is accepted, when one can expose ignorance, express feelings, try out new hypotheses, challenge other ideas, and engage in mutual criticism.” (Palmer, 1983, pp. 71-74).

Second, we are responsible for maintaining contact with the transcendent centre that *calls* into being and shapes a community of diverse individuals into an organic, interrelated and mutually responsive body. In other words, by focusing on the subject matter (letting the subjects speak for themselves) in the spirit and practice of prayer and *meditation*, and by being mindful of the gathered students and of the teacher, deep learning occurs. Of course, this

learning will be influenced by the developmental level of the group. But the goal is shared by children, youth and adults: openness to and empathy with *others* who are different; interdependence; respect for each other’s rights; *internalisation* of authority; shared wisdom in the ongoing search for truth.

Certainly, in the classroom the teacher is the primary academic resource who is required to evaluate and document the performance of students. The teacher (who is also a learner) is not the same as the student. While there can be genuine dialogue in the classroom, it does not mean that there is equal power in it. The teacher has the responsibility for designing the environment and for guiding the process of education.

### Teaching by Design

What we do as we strive to teach with a *passion for the possible* is more than just shaping. As Gabriel Moran puts it, “all attempts to shape human life are reshaping of past achievements.” (Moran, 1997, p. 68). He goes on to say that for a human learner, “shaping is of the human organism in relation to its environment. This relation already has a shape so that a teacher can only help to reshape what is given.” Moran suggests the term **design** because it attempts to capture both the expressed intent of the human teacher and the material limits of what can be taught. For him, design is a more precise image than shape. I agree.

**Shaping** is a term that implies a pre-existing thing to be worked upon. The emphasis is on the thing or object. Design has to do with an activity. As Moran points out, “the potential learner is doing something; to teach is to change what is being done.” (Moran, 1997, p. 70). All teaching-learning is by doing. Aristotle wrote that there is only one activity in teaching and it is in the learner. Across the whole range of human learning, Aristotle sees an underlying principle: “Men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, and brave by doing brave acts.” (Moran, 1997, p. 71). So as long as we teach, we are students of teaching. We become better teachers by teaching – or at least we should.

Teaching by design includes *instruction*. Indeed, instruction has a central place in teaching. It does not impede human freedom. Anyone who wishes to learn needs instruction. Good instruction is precisely directed at the elements of the skill involved. As a student masters the skill, he or she will find ways to go beyond the instruction, or to work variations within the instruction. But there is a key point: instruction is a highly directive act. It is intentional and specific. So, as Moran concludes, a good teacher is one who “shows how.”

*We simply cannot escape that responsibility* – we are obliged to instruct. A passionate commitment for the possible does not mean that “anything goes.” Rather, it means that we intentionally strive to use every measure of creativity that we can muster to inspire and lure our students to awaken their own spirits. Consequently, modelling is central to teaching.

### **Teaching Morally: The Ethic of Caring**

We know from experience that teaching is often lonely, repetitive work in which we are continually asked to give and in which we end the day emotionally drained. We cannot avoid thinking: Why do we continue to do it? What keeps us going? The answer is simple but profound: because we *care*. Caring implies fidelity, that is, on the one hand, a state or quality of faithfulness and on the other, a high degree of accuracy. Why “accuracy?” When we are reflectively faithful to someone or something, we try to refine or fine tune our faithfulness. We are in *good faith* when we know what or to whom we are faithful, when we have reflected on the reasons and emotions involved in our faithfulness at ever finer and truer levels (Noddings, 1980, p. 384).

The fidelity we exercise in fulfilling our responsibilities is not just a faithfulness to duty or principles but is a direct response to our relationship with our students. When we are guided by an ethic of caring, we do not ask whether it is our *duty* to be faithful; rather, faithfulness to persons *is* fidelity. Aristotle describes fidelity in the teacher-learner relationship as a “moral type of friendship, which is not on fixed terms: it makes a gift, or does whatever it does, as to a friend.” (Aristotle, cited in Noddings, 1980). Further, Aristotle says, we wish that our friends should be good persons, and we wish this for their own sakes. Thus, teaching requires our fidelity to persons. But here is where we need a delicate balance. Fidelity to persons does not mean that we compromise standards of academic excellence, the acquisition of skills or accepted norms of behaviour. For example, we don’t let students “get away with things” because we don’t want to offend them. Or, we do not ask how we should treat children so that they will better be able to learn reading or maths. Rather, we ask what our teaching of any lesson might contribute to the development of good persons. Our guiding principles for teaching reading, maths, or any other subject, are chosen with this ideal in mind. We repeatedly ask ourselves: What effect will this lesson or material have on the person of those I teach? On the wider human community?

But there is even more to it than that. Fidelity goes deeper than questions of method and imagination to

qualities of character – our own character. Teachers must have the capacity for eliciting trust as well as the ability to engage in a creative confrontation that is at the heart of all good teaching. This means that we need the personal courage to make demands on our students, to insist that they rewrite a paragraph or report until it makes better sense, and to do the work that is necessary to learn well. That is to say that we need a sense of our own authority.

Authority is both individual and social. We personally earn it, and it is also given to us by the broader community. Authority rests on the legitimate consent of those who willingly render obedience to another in order to accomplish a worthwhile end. But in this authority students still retain their freedom. In other words, under genuine authority, obedience is freely given.

We probably all have an example of our inability to teach a student who refused to recognise our authority. Perhaps we have some students who have given up on schooling and long for the day when they are done with it. Such students might seem untouchable, and it is easy to give up on them by offering them time-killing exercises or busywork. We do have another choice. We can see these students as persons to whom we have a pedagogical obligation, to whom we owe a good-faith effort. No matter how well we know our material, it is not enough to capture the interest of our students. Nor is it enough to use a creative method of teaching. To be effective, we must have the capacity to engender trust in our authority. Recent ideas on the ethic of caring can be of help to us in trying to achieve that goal.

### **Spirituality and Caring**

The extensiveness of our caring for the well-being of our students is a measure of the richness of our own spirituality. Students bring a host of personal concerns to the classroom, and so do we as teachers. Yet, the burden is on us as teachers to “put off to the side” our own needs, moods and anxieties. Our obligation is to teach – that is, to serve. *We owe our students a good deal more than students owe us*. These moral obligations make teaching an ever-demanding task. So it is not surprising that every teacher will occasionally fall short of her or his own expectations. The wonder is how often most of us are able to meet them.

It helps to think of ourselves as moral beings who are concerned with defining our own life purposes in a way that arouses our students to do the same. The zest for our moral lives that we display to our students has the capacity to stir their hearts and minds. Young people are more likely to be affected by teachers who themselves are questioning, pondering, and learning.

Obviously, this process will be different for various age levels. Young people have to pass through stages of development to be able to think about what they are doing and to take responsibility. We can recognise three aspects of our task:

- (1) Equipping young people with the ability to identify alternatives and to see results and possibilities in the situations they confront
- (2) Teaching principles and perspectives by means of which those situations can be evaluated, as well as the norms that should guide their choices
- (3) Enabling students to make decisions of principle; to reflect, to articulate, and to act in good faith

A sense of moral “oughtness” is essential to this whole process. Along with a sense of self, there must be attentiveness to others. A rich imagination is needed to discover ways of living together justly and pursuing common goals. All of this will not happen unless we as teachers are ourselves committed to looking through the eyes of each of our students and confronting the lived reality and possibility of their and our common good. It will help if we can give our students splendid and striking examples of those who live virtuous lives.

### Teaching for Virtue

*Virtue can be caught and taught.*  
(Lickona, 1991)

We now recognise this to be true. In the 1970s U.S. education began a phase of “values clarification” in which the slogan was, “values are caught not taught.” One of its principles was that the teacher should never directly tell students what is right or wrong; instead, students should be left to discover “values” on their own. Many teachers now recognise that failing to do their job of inculcating moral principles does exact a price that is paid by bewildered students who are being denied a structured way to develop values. The result is moral relativism. Students deserve better.

How sad it is that teachers feel unable to defend their own beliefs such as, for example, that cheating is wrong. Those of us who teach in religious schools should be able to declare that there really is such a thing as *moral* knowledge, and that our religious tradition has something to say about it. We have learned something about basic decency, about human rights and vice and virtue, over several thousand years of civilisation. This knowledge is preserved in our religious

inheritance: the teachings, traditions, and lives of the people who share our common story.

Throughout history, moral education was accomplished through the use of moral tales and parable. Saul Bellow maintains that the survival of Jewish culture would be inconceivable without the stories that gave meaning to the Jewish moral tradition. One such story is called, *If Not Higher*. It can help to make the point.

There was once a rabbi in a small Jewish village in Russia who vanished every Friday morning for several hours. The devoted villagers boasted that during these hours the rabbi ascended to Heaven to talk with God. A skeptical newcomer arrived in town, determined to discover where the rabbi really was.

One Friday morning the newcomer hid near the rabbi’s house, watched him rise, say his prayers, and put on the clothes of a peasant. He saw him take an axe and go into the forest, chop down a tree and gather a large bundle of wood. Next the rabbi proceeded to a shack in the poorest section of the village in which lived an old woman and her sick son. He left them the wood which was enough for a week. The rabbi then quietly returned to his own house.

The story concludes that the newcomer stayed on in the village and became a disciple of the rabbi. And whenever he hears one of his fellow villagers say, “On Friday morning our rabbi ascends all the way to heaven,” the newcomer quietly adds, “If not higher.”(as cited in Sommers, 1998).

This story is unlike the sterile moral dilemmas of value clarification in which there is no obvious right or wrong, no clear virtue or vice. The dilemmas may engage the minds of the students, but they only marginally engage their emotions. It is difficult to get students to “care” about the characters. And it is hard to imagine parents and teachers passing down to their children and students the moral dilemmas of seven people in a lifeboat with provisions for only four— a dilemma commonly used in values clarification exercises.

In contrast, in the story of the rabbi and the skeptical outsider, it is not up to the listener to decide whether or not the rabbi did the right thing. The moral message is clear: “Here is a good man – merciful, compassionate and helpful to some who are weak and vulnerable. *Be like that person.*” The

message is contagious. Even the skeptic gets the point (as cited in Sommers, 1998).

Of course, stories and parables are not always appropriate for a high school or college ethics course, but the literary classics certainly are. So are bible stories. Students can be helped to understand and sympathise with what the author is saying about the moral ties that bind the characters and hold in place the social fabric in which they play their roles. As teachers we must care enough to help our students become acquainted with their moral heritage in religion, literature, and philosophy. An agreeable atmosphere will enhance our caring. Such an atmosphere is one in which

- There will be behaviour codes that emphasise civility, kindness, and honesty
- Teachers will be praised and rewarded for insisting on basic respect, decency, honesty, and fairness
- Children will be told stories that reinforce goodness; in high school and college students will be reading, studying, and discussing the moral classics.

To sum up, *virtue can be taught and caught*. To teach morally is to help make students keenly aware that their *own character* is at stake.

### Teaching as Caring

No matter which grade level we teach, we are called on to be sources of moral counsel. We must routinely put our own integrity and sense of judgement on public display. There is no escape from this. It makes claims on us. Somehow we could say that there is an obligation to try to realise in ourselves and other the kinds of ideal we express in our teaching about them. We begin to realise that if we are to expect our students to understand moral rules and principles, this will include being a certain kind of person ourselves.

Helping students respond to issues and situations can be unsettling. We find ourselves asking – while students look on – “How should I react? What is the right thing to say? What should I do?” It doesn’t take long to realise that students at every level of education seem to tune in closely at such moments. Even a teacher who refuses to offer a response is sending a signal to the students – namely that she or he has no intellectual or moral stance on the subject and would rather “pass the buck.” But one really cannot do this.

Teaching is always and at once both an intellectual and a moral behaviour. The two aspects are thoroughly intertwined. We may have had conversations with those who try to argue that the

fundamental purpose of education is to teach the mind. But in the concrete circumstances of learning and living in schools, the mind becomes much more than a cognitive object. The mind becomes an evolving constellation formed of attitudes, dispositions and capacities that takes shape through the process of education (Hansen, 1995, p. 123).

Just think about it. A maths teacher might claim to be teaching students only to think well in manipulating numbers. But “thinking well” involves self-discipline, concentration, effort, imagination and more, all of which extend beyond doing maths to how one addresses the questions that arise in life. To claim that one is “only” teaching good thinking or good understanding of subject matter presupposes a moral conviction that *a student’s life will be better as a result of that teaching*. Otherwise, why engage in it?

Our understanding of teaching as a vocation helps us to draw these dimensions together. Teachers who deal with “neutral” subject matter (chemistry, earth science, reading, for example) have, at some level, the conviction that it is better for a student to know the material than never to be exposed to it. They believe that they are enabling students to move from a less desirable to a better position through their teaching. In fact, the concept of *teaching* implies that there is something worthwhile to attain. What is this *something*? It is the stretching and expanding the students’ world and the nurturing of the students’ ethical ideal. This is what makes the activity worth the effort. The teacher *cares*.

A teacher cannot “preach” this ethic of caring. She or he must live it. That implies establishing a relationship with the students. Besides talking to them and showing them care, he or she teaches all subjects in such a way as to emphasise their social and personal aspects, showing them how human beings are affected by them and pointing out the responsibilities that flow out of them. Everything we do as teachers has moral implications. Through *dialogue, modelling, practice and the assignment of best motive*, a caring teacher nurtures the ethical ideal (Noddings, 1984, pp. 179ff). What we reflect to our students contributes to the enhancement of that ideal if we meet our students as they are and find something admirable in them. As a result of this confirmation, our students may find the strength to become even more admirable. We leave them with an image that is lovelier than the one they had of themselves. We do not need to establish a deep, lasting, time-consuming personal relationship with every student. What we must do is to be totally present to each student as she or he addresses us.

In sum, to teach morally we need to care.

## Facing Ourselves Facing the Unfamiliar: Multiple Vulnerabilities

If **only** I had the confidence of being a good teacher. But I'm not even an appalling teacher. I don't even claim to be a teacher at all. I'm just a nitwit somehow let loose among children (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 179ff).

How many of us have felt this way – secretly – while we are pressed to continue our work! Moments of self-doubt find their way into our lives whether we teach five-year-olds or thirty-five-year olds. We try to think of reasons for them, as did Sylvia Ashton-Warner:

If only I kept workbooks and made schemes and taught like other teachers I should have the confidence of numbers. It's the payment, the price of walking alone. Yet ... I've got to do what I believe. And I believe in all I do. It's this price one continually pays for stepping out of line. I'm feeling too old to pay it. But I **must** do what I believe in or nothing at all (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 198).

This is every teacher's dilemma. In spite of all our education and experience, we are still vulnerable. It often doesn't take much to remind us of just how vulnerable we really are. As teachers we are really dedicated to pursue the worthwhile. Just what is worthwhile is largely defined in the day-to-day life of the classroom. We have to be concerned with specific actions and actual decisions, not those found in textbooks we studied in teacher preparation classes.

Our concern is with *this* class and *these* students. As we prepare our lessons, we have to decide what to do to focus on worthwhile achievement. We have to decide how to communicate information, when to permit free, creative activity in place of required tasks, whether to nurture sensitivity in certain situations instead of encouraging cognitive actions. Ashton-Warner was constantly dealing with these *multiple small uncertainties*, as the above passages reveal. We face these almost every day – or *at least we should*, for example, whom we should call on, whom to discipline, whom to reward, whether to pay attention to the rhythms of the students' inner time or to follow the clock and so forth. Then when we consider our choices, we feel that we must justify them so as to persuade ourselves and others that we are doing what is right.

So much of what we do is precarious. Even in the best of circumstances we are faced with

predicaments. Teachers must establish some control while motivating and ensuring that students actually learn. We must insist that our students do tasks that are sometimes boring and often difficult. We frequently get drained by the emotional demands of our students and are sometimes frustrated by our inability to meet all of their intellectual needs. And there are wider uncertainties. In the last twenty years or so, teachers have suffered a loss of social esteem and status. Parents are more critical, demanding and divided. It is more difficult to establish a common set of expectations that are supportive of our efforts to maintain discipline and to inspire our students. We sometimes feel alone.

Teaching has never been easy. Like a parent, one can never be fully prepared for all of the demands of teaching. The loftier our goals, the more likely we are to fail to measure up to them. Yet we continue, despite the drain:

Back to school after two snow days – good to be back although I have a slight flu.

Mary looking tired from weeks of family turmoil.

Ronnie, with bad cough and sore throat and looking feverish, pulled me close to him and said his parents went to court to fight over who should care for him.

Annie was full of anxious chatter about moving to a new house in a few weeks.

Carol brings a Haitian friend who speaks no English to visit for a day.

Joey's mother weeps from homesickness for Taiwan.

Debbie nervously admits that she left her notebooks at home.

All this between 8.30 a.m. and 8.45 a.m. (Elementary school teacher's journal).

7.45 a.m. Feeling partially liberated. How can anyone claim to "love teaching" if he feels such relief when it's over and done? Two more classes, easy ones, ahead, then months, perhaps eighteen months, without classes. What bliss in prospect. Yet I don't feel like retiring completely yet.

But why does a class like yesterday's, the final class ... seem so scary in prospect, so difficult in execution? It was not very good; truth is, because I was tense and pushing – telling them rather than teaching them (College teacher's journal).

Sound familiar? As reported in research on teachers, diaries of teachers are filled with references to all the students they have failed to serve or reach. In these private reflections, teachers are also torn between the way they would prefer to teach and the demands of prescribed curricula (cited in Booth, 1988, p. 219). Does this sound like burnout? It could. But I agree with the author of the second journal entry who also wrote “it sounds more like evidence that this profession can never become boring. If I get bored *here*, it is my fault, not the fault of anything in teaching.”

Teaching is unpredictable from hour to hour, from minute to minute. There are tears when you don't expect them, laughter when you might predict tears. There are flashes of insight and embarrassing displays of ignorance. The results are almost always uncertain. And here's the rub: The more attuned we are to the needs of our students, the more unsure we are of what we or they actually achieve. While we guide, stimulate and challenge, we must at the same time feel the most tender regard for each student's privacy and being. What is a teacher to do? A good place to begin is by talking to other teachers. If we want to grow as teachers, we must learn to talk to each other about our inner lives – about our own identity and integrity.

Schools can be places where teachers come together to live out their vocation, not only places where teachers and students engage in activities to satisfy accrediting agencies. I believe it is possible for schools to be forums of learning that are shaped to help teachers view their work as participation in the formation of another's story, and having their own story influenced by the other. Such a vocation is to answer the call of the *community* and *tradition*. The *community* includes the youth, adults and families served by the school. The *traditions* are the communal recollections and hope which give structure, meaning and value to individual and collective lives (Durka, 1988, p. 17).

### **Facing Ourselves, Together**

...when you come to think about it, you find that of the two kinds of order, the conscious and the unconscious order, only one is real. It's the order in the deep hidden places .... The true order in the depths. The “still center.” (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 87).

The call to teach is embedded in mystery. The more we engage with our students as persons, the more we affirm our own incompleteness. We become more aware of spaces still to be explored, desires still to be uncovered, possibilities still to be

opened. For many of us, our sense of incompleteness is heightened by *how we handle our time and our vulnerability*.

**Time.** Soon after we first answer our calling to be a teacher, we are confronted with the dilemma of how to spend our time. Some of us have learned to hoard time as a miser hoards money. There just never seems to be enough time to do what needs to be done. We are faced with making priorities for ourselves: family responsibilities, personal needs, demands of friendship, professional tasks. Some of us feel the pressure to carefully account for every moment. Is it all right to splurge now and then to spend an afternoon with friends? To take time out to play with our own children? To try out some new recipes? To read a novel or see a play? Those who are time-hoarders will recognise these dilemmas. Always lurking in the back of our minds is the concern about keeping up with our fields of teaching. We may feel forever behind with trying to keep up with our professional reading or attending workshops and seminars, and therefore think of ourselves as failing in our duty. There is just so much to do.

**Vulnerability.** No matter what age group we teach, we are always “on,” always exposed to others. We are scrutinised and judged daily by all the students we teach. This can be very draining. We can grow weary of performing, entertaining, stimulating and filling up others' emptiness. We can tire of trying to stimulate, encourage, comfort and discipline our students. But if we open our hearts to the wisdom of experience, we can have fewer such days. We can come to realise that students must learn and achieve for themselves, not to please their teachers. There will always be those who do not meet our standards, and it takes quite a bit of humility to admit this. Our concern for our students does not excuse us from the obligation to exercise our authority, evaluate student progress, and attend to the standards set by the broader community, as well as nurture students in an atmosphere of warmth and understanding. By so doing, teachers rediscover the values of care. We reach back to our own experiences of caring and being cared for, and as Nel Noddings (1984) writes, we embrace the ideal of nurture through “dialogue, practice, and confirmation.” How does this process look?

**Dialogue** is difficult because it requires rethinking our notion of authority. It does not mean that we surrender it. The teacher cannot pretend to be the same as the student. The teacher is the one who is responsible for designing the environment to make teaching and learning possible. Dialogue requires a conversation between the “content” or “curriculum” and the students' needs. It means allowing their problems and questions to deepen

within them and then helping them to express these even if it means that there might be some tension as a result. We should not forget that tension can be creative.

Practice implies a climate of hospitality in which genuine conversations can take place. Henri Nouwen (1975) complained that the classroom is often an inhospitable place, and he calls for the “creation of a space where students can enter into a fearless communication with each other and allow their respective life experiences to be their primary and most valuable source of growth and maturation.” Students are allowed to ask questions and think creatively about the content. Perhaps some of us can recall how it felt when we were asked a question that was ignored, or when we were told to put our hand down when we were poised to ask a question. While we as teachers have objectives and goals, the students have needs that must be addressed. The burden is on us to prepare our material as well as possible, deliver it as efficiently and creatively as possible, yet be willing to adjust our methods and materials to the unique setting in which we are teaching. We cannot teach the same way year after year. Recall the joke in the question, “Do you have twenty years of experience, or one year of experience repeated twenty times?”

**Confirmation** is what results from an environment of hospitality in which dialogue is practised. It is cyclic. The stronger and more confident students become, the more courageous they are to take risks and try some things they never had the courage to try before. They can tap their own resources.

As the students are confirmed, so are we as teachers. Confirmation affirms us as persons and teachers. When the students give us an attentive listening, verbal and non-verbal support, a word of thanks, we are made bolder and we try harder. The song from *The King and I* says it well:

It's a very ancient saying  
But a true and honest thought  
That if you become a teacher  
By your pupils you'll be taught  
(Oscar Hammerstein, *Getting to Know You*)

### **Facing the Unfamiliar**

In spite of all the vulnerabilities we feel in carrying out the day-to-day tasks of teaching, the fact remains that we are engaged in exciting work. This is so because we are constantly being called upon to deal with the *unfamiliar*. The frontiers of teaching are infinitely broad and expanding. Each time we teach a new course, we embark on a new adventure full of risk and uncertainty that causes us to stretch our talents and abilities. So it is when we teach a new class of students. Truly, our work, our

calling, is hardly boring. It continuously puts demands on our soul. Sophie Freud (1987, p. 130) puts it well, “Nothing demands more inner discipline than self-imposed work.” It takes work and inner discipline to be creative. We have to be willing to stick with the process, often at the expense of going to a movie, visiting friends, or cooking a special meal, for example. We can become exasperated at having to prioritise especially when we ourselves have chosen this path.

There is also the response of our students. How will they react to this new idea or novel method, to this strange bit of information or unusual work of art? Amidst the novelty, we can discover the depths of our vulnerability. How devastated are we after one student's negative comment? Can it put us off the mark for days? Is there any way to become less vulnerable? Probably not. The more risks we take, the more vulnerable we become. But we can become less devastated by criticism and more able to learn from it. We can reconcile ourselves to the fact that we will never be liked or appreciated by all the students all the time. We can realise that in the process of becoming more open and more vulnerable, we can actually become stronger.

There is one more vulnerability that can haunt our soul – the fear that comes with success. It creeps up as we relish our success after a particularly good day, exhilarating lesson or demonstration. Back in the recesses of our mind we wonder what we can do for an encore. How will we live up to these new standards or expectations? Will next week's class or tomorrow's lesson be as stimulating? Are the compliments about this class really a subtle criticism of other classes?

What keeps *us* going? I believe it is *passion for our work*. Yet, although passion for our work makes us less dependent on other people, it does not insure invulnerability (Freud, 1987, p. 134). Teaching is fraught with paradoxes. We still need to rely on students, schools, material goods, to make teaching possible. Passion alone is not enough. A teacher's calling demands that we embrace the paradoxes inherent in our response:

...the paradoxes of my life are related to being a student and teacher of topics that intimately touch my own and other people's lives. Such a field demands total devotion to its subject matter, as well as providing rich and varied life experiences. It demands tight self-discipline and loose creativity. It demands openness to people and absorption with ideas, protection of time and energy, as well as endless commitment to students. It demands both

solitude and many human encounters. It demands skills of objectivity, observation, and involvement, distance as well as intimacy. It demands self-assurance, power, and humility (Freud, 1987, p. 134).

Such is the passion that makes us teach amidst so many paradoxes. Who will know if we are adequate to the calling? Thomas More had a glimmer of the answer when in Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*, he suggests to the young Richard,

"Why not be a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher. Perhaps even a great one." And Richard answers,  
"And if I was, who would know it?" To which More replies,  
"You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public that..." (Bolt cited in McNulty, 1979, p. 140).

Indeed.

### Some Concluding Thoughts

When teachers become disillusioned or burned out, we all would do well to examine how the school contributes to this drain on their human spirit. Can it be that schools are not designed to support the living-out of teaching as a vocation? About twenty years ago, Dwayne Huebner explored the question:

What would happen if schools were shaped by an image of school as a place where those who are called to be teachers come together to live out their vocation, instead of teaching being shaped and pummeled by forms of schooling? (DwayneHuebner, 1991, p. 464).

This question still has import for schools. If the metaphor of vocation would dominate teachers' own description of their task, the activity of teaching would become meaning-making for teachers as well as for students.

Teaching has been described as *planting roots and giving wings*. These images help us to see the broader picture of what we are engaged in, and they can help us to be energised to keep at it. We can more easily realise that hope must be nurtured to be sustained. Our encouragement and affirmation can lure our students to try harder, reach farther, and believe more strongly in themselves and others. These moments are moments of empowerment and transformation, of *giving wings*. Such moments are eloquently described by the poet Christopher Logue (1987):

Appolinaire said, "Come to the edge."

"It's too high."

"Come to the edge."

"We might fall."

"COME TO THE EDGE."

And they came.

And she pushed them.

And they flew.

Teaching can't get much better than that.

It is true that the burden of education cannot be placed solely on teachers. Nevertheless our power as agents of personal and social transformation cannot be overestimated. Nor can the importance of schools be exaggerated. The world needs safe places where people can be honest about their own vulnerability and courageous enough to take risks into the future. Schools could be such places – communities where teachers and administrators are companions on a shared journey. Then, it seems to me, teachers will be less likely to be overwhelmed by novelty. Rather, they will embrace new challenges in faithfulness to their vocation of remembering tradition, sharing common human experience, and working for a vision of the future towards which we all strive – a peaceful world in which beauty and justice flourish.

To believe this is possible is to know *the amazing grace of teaching*.

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## NEW PUBLICATION

### *HERMENEUTICS AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION*

*Edited by*

**H. Lombaerts & D. Pollefeyt**

As post-modern thinkers claim, the most striking aspect of contemporary consciousness is the interruption of or rupture with tradition. Meta-stories no longer function as assumed and unifying systems of meaning. A certain philosophical, ethical, biblical tradition is gradually forgotten. What then will guide the historical choices of humanity in the near future? This question has advanced more and more to the fore during the past forty years (from Foreword, p. viii).

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