

TOWARD THE DEFINITION OF A GREAT TEACHER

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We teachers can quantify a few things—correct answers in arithmetic, mathematical errors on a composition, vocabulary words, historical dates, identification of fictive characters and chemical formulae. Most of the time though, each of us finds the heart of his subject matter elusive: How does one teach another to appreciate literature, to relish history or to sustain for life an interest in scientific processes? As elusive, as subjective as these matters are, they are intrinsically related to that which almost defies definition—the teaching process and its center the teacher himself.

For many years I have been distributed by the cold criteria of the good teacher which appear in textbooks of educational psychology or sociology. Normally one finds either a list of injunctions (don't be sarcastic; don't be overly permissive; don't be authoritarian) or a list of affirmations (be kind and considerate; be loving; know your subject matter; participate in community affairs) or a combination of these (be kind and loving but not too much). The novice teacher, confronted by such a list, doesn't know whether to join the Boy Scouts or the Rotary, or find new parents. What the criteria lack, of course, are contexts—live teachers in real classrooms before live students.

Such contexts are next to impossible to observe. Rarely do we have time to visit each other's classrooms; even if we did, we would not be sure of context, for our very presence in the back of the room produces subtle changes in the interplay between teacher and student. I know full well that the student teacher I observe as a supervisor from the university is not the same student teacher whom the students most frequently perceive. The student teachers themselves tell me this, and they are not above forewarning their students: "I want you to behave when that strange man comes to visit the class, the one with the fading hairline and the big notebook." Even experimental uses of closed-circuit television offer no great promise: Students may become comfortable with the cyclopean eye, but rarely does the teacher, who knows full well he is on camera, best tie forward. Too, there may be something obscene about televised classrooms, an immoral invasion of sacrosanct land in which the forces of love and hate and knowledge should semi-privately contend.

If textbook criteria do not serve and if observations of live teachers before live students in valid contexts are impossible, where are we to go to find teachers who are models of greatness? The answer, I hold, is to literature, to those short stories, essays, novels and biographies containing descriptions of or portrayals of teachers. Deficiencies, exist, of course, in one's attempt to formulate a core definition of the great teacher through reading, for the word is never the thing. Further, while much has been written about

brilliant teachers whose classes are composed of highly articulate youngsters, little literary tribute has been paid teachers who are confronted daily with hordes of illiterate and inarticulate students. One can readily account for the discrepancy between the plethora and the paucity: Literature is written by the literate, those capable of artistically ordering or reordering reminiscences of teachers who have affected their lives for better or worse.

Nonetheless, deficiencies must be weighed against assets: The reader is unobtrusive observer, and the literary artist, in the process of selectivity, can focus upon those characteristics least peripheral to the teacher as teacher and to the students as students. There is expected slippage, of course; for no one can truly divorce the man outside the classroom from the teacher within or separate the child at home from the one who occupies the third seat, second row from the door. The important point is that the outer extremities of the target are viewed so that one can fully appreciate the circumference of the bull's-eye, like the macrocosm away from the classroom feeding into life, the microcosm, with its four walls, chalkboard and patterns and demands not too unlike those outside the window.

Even if one grants, though, that literature can provide a rich source for inducting the characteristics of a great teacher, he is himself confronted with the problem of selectivity. At what points, if any, do Socrates and Miss Dove meet? Do Mr. Chips and Irwin Edman have anything in common, or are their personal characteristics, their subject matter, and their methodology so disparate that one can abstract nothing that will bind the two? Where on a continuum of greatness should one place Anne Sullivan Macy, who steps quietly from Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life* to dominate the stage in *The Miracle Worker*? Finally, what definition of teacher greatness can be deduced which will be as applicable to the teacher of the mentally deficient as it is to the teacher of the intelligent?

There exist no ready answers to such questions, for one viewing the teacher in literature is uneasily but inexorably driven to a subtle tripartite classification: the great personality as distinct from the great teacher; the great personality as great teacher; and the great teacher as distinct from the great personality. Convergencies are inevitable in the twilight between black and white. Who has not learned something from being in the charismatic presence of the great personality? Too, every teacher brings into the classroom a personality of sorts. Minimum to greatness, I believe, is that the teacher command the respect of his students and that this ability to command-without-demanding-derives from respect of self, subject, and students.

Despite the difficulties, guidelines do emerge tenuously as the teacher begins to pose questions of awareness and of intent: Does the teacher see each student as unique from him, though possessing that which embraces us all-our common humanity; or does he assume that the class exists as audience for the extension of his, and only his, personality? Aware, as he must be, of the dependency of his charges upon him, does he exploit that dependency by creating disciples en masse or a coterie that perpetually

yearns to hear the latest word from the master; or does he envision and plan for the time of his obsolescence when each student can function autonomously without him?

Here Charles Townsend Copeland and I part company; here I begin to feel uneasy with Mr. Chips, for I am suspicious of the meetings of the inner circle in “Copey’s” room at Harvard and the tea and crumpets served the boys in Chip’s parlor. There is such a thing as being dependent upon dependency; we are all too aware of the mother who doesn’t wish her children to grow away from her and, to a lesser extent, of the psychiatrist who is in no hurry for patients to become well. Almost overlooked is the teacher who tacitly woos affection and perpetual homage, who seems to be seeking the Boswell in knickers who someday will immortally record the words of the man up front.

To the degree that one can infer intent clearly, to that degree can he distinguish the great teacher as separate from the great personality; for the great teacher, regardless of intensity of personality, will consciously or unconsciously seek students to be ultimately free from, not bound to, himself. He will recognize, naturally, that no man, including himself, is entirely free; that education is a process from which total emancipation, short of death, is impossible. But given the imposed limits of himself, a particular year, a particular student or group of students, and a discipline to teach, he will provide opportunities for each student to explore the limits of his own freedom within the structure.

If one holds such a concept of great teaching, then he can silently applaud the greatness of Louis Agassiz’ first assignment for Charles Scudder, a graduate student in entomology. Agassiz, the great nineteenth century zoologist, maintaining that no man is fit to be a naturalist who does not know how to take care of specimens, requested Scudder to keep a fish, an haemulon, moist with alcohol. After removing the fish from the bottle which was kept, Agassiz virtually departed for three days, returning only now and then to ask his student what he had learned. Left alone with his fish each day driven by ennui to examine it, to note “the pores of the head, fleshy lips and lidless eyes; the spinous fins and forked tail; the compressed and arched body,” Scudder forever learned the meaning of scientific observation. Too, one holding such a notion of great teaching can fully appreciate the trials of Anne Sullivan Macy as she endured the tantrums and the physical attacks of seven-year-old Helen Keller, refusing to once deviate in her attempt to set the animal-child free via language. One can now understand why Socrates’ suicide accounts in good part for his being the exemplar of the great teacher. Had he attempted to circumvent the spirit of the law, had he not been willing to die for the principles he had avowed, he would have been lost to us as a model. By his death, he not only enfranchised his students from himself but he simultaneously provided them-and us-with the ultimate standard for integrity.

In short, if a teacher commands the respect of his students, if he envisions his central task as that of imparting knowledge to advance human freedom, if he is willing to sacrifice himself for the principles he teaches, then he is a great teacher, whether he teach in a rural one-room elementary school, in an august university, or in a slum school in Harlem.

He may go unheralded in literature, uncodified in textbooks, unobserved by outsiders, but by the strength of a democracy he shall be known.