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## **Bitter Lessons: What's Wrong with American Teachers**

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*Whom the gods hate they make schoolmasters.*

—Lucian

Last week I picked up the *Poughkeepsie Journal* in a luncheonette near Vassar. Over coffee I started to read a piece by an actor titled "The Actor's Mind." Fine, I thought, tell me something about acting. But here is how the thing opened: "As a young man in high school facing my future I only knew one career I *didn't* want. And that was a schoolteacher's."

Ouch. After thirty years as a teacher, you might think I had become accustomed to such characterizations. To the population at large I'm afraid teachers are regarded as people to be patronized. What makes this disrespect doubly chilling is that teaching is the most *watched* line of work in the world. Nearly everybody was locked up with us from childhood until early adulthood. We can't claim that the reason people think badly of us is because they don't know what we are about. They know all too well.

It's not only those outside the profession who express an enduring dissatisfaction with teaching, but insiders as well. Year after year we witness a large turnover among those teachers lucky enough to have career options. In the wealthy Manhattan school district where I taught for many years, teachers come and go like leaves in autumn. And in nearly all schools the most desirable "teaching" jobs are those involving little or no contact with children.

Why is this? Perhaps because those who remain in teaching for any considerable time, barring a few saboteurs and loonies, can never be more than the instruments of policy made in remote chambers by unknown men and women. Even in "alternative" schools, in every matter concerning public policy teachers are shells, agents of the state—or they are fired.

Many things conspire to conceal this reality. At the head of the list is the curious teacher certification process that favors young, tractable acolytes fresh out of college and licenses them for long-term seminary-like confinement in schools, away from the world and each other. It is a weird, quasi-monastic, lifetime commitment for those who stay.

Another factor is the extremely shallow nature of intellectual enterprise in schools: ideas are broken into fragments called subjects, subjects into units, units into sequences, sequences

into lessons, lessons into homework, and all these prefabricated pieces make a school teacherproof. The lack of intellectual ambition forced on schoolteachers and students alike produces in them a smallness of personal presence, which is further diminished by a cacophony of ringing bells and announcements and by endless interruptions for testing, counseling, and special events.

Most teachers don't treat themselves or their work seriously enough to run afoul of the people who make policy. Science teachers, for instance, teach the way they are told, though to do so is the antithesis of what science means. These teachers sell ritual procedures and memorization as Science to kids who will never know any better. A different kind of teacher would help kids design original experiments, test hypotheses, and search for truth. Imagine millions of children unleashed to follow the road to discovery in uniquely personal ways. Of course, any teacher who really did that would be fired.

It might help you to see my point if we compare teachers and surgeons. If a respected surgeon explained to you that your kidney had to be removed, no barrier other than your own agreement would stand in the way. This would be true even if another less convincing surgeon energetically advised you to keep both kidneys in place.

In contrast, if a schoolteacher prescribed three days of independent study and only two days of class per week for a particular student, and assuming both student and family agreed, who could allow it? The principal? The district superintendent? The local school board? The state education department? The teacher's union? The dean of a teachers' college? A court? The federal Department of Education? None of these agencies has the absolute power to release an individual from the lock-step march; each could be battered by violent political opposition. Only an act of the state legislature, which would require years of lobbying, could do it. A surgeon may tinker with a kidney much more easily than a teacher may tinker with compulsory schooling laws.

School teachers aren't allowed to do what they think best for each student. Harnessed to a collectivized regimen, they soon give up thinking seriously about students as one-of-a-kind individuals, regardless of what they may say or even wish were true. The two-faced aspect of schoolteaching—in which teachers are forced into a constant pretense of caring, forced to act as principals when they are merely agents, forced to pretend that insignificant work has important connections with human development—is the major reason teaching is held in such low regard.

If our present, weary school-reform hysteria is not to end where all the others have ended—in more of the same—we must bell the cat of school restructuring: alterations in time, place, and text are not enough. We won't get different schools from the same old teachers any more than we'll get a different piece of cake from the same old recipe. Schoolteachers will corrupt new structures just by being themselves. And whatever is wrong with teachers, it's clear that colleges and teacher certification procedures have been unable to fix it. We need to accept that there exists no scientific formula by which a good teacher can be "trained" as if he or she were a circus dog. We need to reinvent the teacher. We need the teachers we never had.

Teachers teach who they are; if they are incomplete people, they reproduce their incompleteness in their students. Institutions like our teacher certification process prevent people from becoming whole by imposing machine logic and directives on human life.

The American system of teacher training was inspired by nineteenth-century Prussian philosophers, who introduced compulsory schooling to the world and encouraged the creation of a teacher proletariat that would serve the state as efficiently as an army. Prussian teachers were allowed to teach nothing personal or substantive; they were trained like soldiers to take orders from staff experts. American educators, enamored of German philosophy, eagerly adopted the Prussian plan with some cosmetic differences, mostly rhetorical. Our teachers have been trained

this way for more than a century, and the deadening effect on individual thinking is the same. This kind of teacher training locks the mind into an official straightjacket. It *arrests* development instead of enhancing it. It prevents men and women from becoming competent adults.

State-controlled schooling, like the military, requires people who unthinkingly obey orders. Such are our teachers—people as light as air, who do as they are told. A few of these docile and compliant people are elevated to positions of small authority as school administrators, but they are still beholden to powerful people behind the scenes for their good job.

Earlier this century, American schools were further burdened by the oppressive influence of Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, and a small handful of the robber barons. Their determination to build an efficient industrial state led them to articulate a plan to systemize the rearing of the young. At the core of this social strategy was the removal of important decisions from familial and individual control and their reassignment to a legion of specialists. The Carnegie Foundation dubbed this system "welfare capitalism." It offered traditional libertarian freedoms to the executive and entrepreneurial classes and forced a form of state socialism on the rest of us. What we lost in freedom, it was argued, we would gain in security.

One byproduct of this rethinking of government was the wholesale breaking of human bonds to other people and particular places. We were all made homeless by it. I think it was a bad bargain. Without personal command over time and without the rights to associate freely with others and to speak freely, life begins to lose its meaning. You can still walk around, but you are dying.

The most striking evidence that we are drowning in a sea of meaninglessness is our growing prison population. Currently we are incarcerating 1.2 million men and women, and 2.8 million more are either paroled convicts or ex-cons—one in every sixty-five citizens. Ours is a system proceeding toward meltdown. The crisis in our schools is not one of reading and writing but of meaning. Until we can decontrol our economy and localize it into thousands of independent communities; until we can decontrol our social system and localize it in the lives of individuals and families; and until we can see the truth that important life choices are not the proper province of any professional establishment, the meaninglessness will continue to grow.

Lecturing age-grouped children in cellblock rooms of featureless buildings is a nightmarish way to teach. (And please don't bring to mind images of slum schools; I'm thinking of wealthy, suburban schools.) What it does to teachers—not to mention students—isn't pleasant to see. It's not a matter of intelligence or goodwill. If a person enters the teaching profession with no skills that command respect, no powerful family ties, no deeply rooted personal culture, no traditions, no sense of God, no familiarity with real work, and no independent nature it would be impossible to acquire them on the job.

I assume a natural urge exists in all of us to become complete, an urge frustrated by squandering too much time obeying the urgencies of other people. This is as true for teachers as it is for students. If we were candid, we'd admit that the most prominent characteristic among the millions who teach school is that they are childlike and incomplete. Here's why: the center of any real person can never be the urgency of an official body. Whole people resist being told what to do and so are natural enemies of schooling. Schools know this. Hence schools socialize teachers to destroy their wholeness. Constant confinement with unhappy children, sterile workplaces, dependence on routines, low-grade intellectual material, bells, lack of privacy, relentless isolation from colleagues, exclusion from policy making—all these stigmas of inferior status quickly wear down teachers or drive them into administration. By teaching who they are, such people inadvertently do harm.

I know there must be teachers and schools you think are exceptions to this indictment, perhaps your own, but I have to disagree. No school agency is strong enough to guarantee the

integrity of the sanctuary of which you're thinking. Of course, there *are* places where teachers are given some freedom because of the personal philosophy of the principal or the character of the community. But when fundamental rights depend on someone's whim, you really have no rights, only privileges that may be withdrawn at any minute. The illusion is sustained only by ignoring the real price paid in deference and dishonesty.

We could take a cue from Mary Foley, a home-schooling mother of four children in Cape Cod, who was recently taken to court by the local school superintendent for refusing to report what she is teaching at home. In a statement to the court she said:

If we are not free to educate our children, our liberty is an illusion. I do not have a curriculum. I have never used one. . . . The state does not have the power to standardize children. My education philosophy precludes the use of a curriculum. My method has been successful enough to produce a daughter who is a member of the National Honor Society and twin sons who . . . tested in the top 1 percent on a national placement test for two consecutive years. The priorities of our curriculum are daydreaming, natural and social sciences, self-discipline, respect of self and others, and making mistakes.

Foley is the kind of schoolteacher that we should be trying to form, one who seeks out the secret of teaching the way a child learns and who finds the courage to do so in spite of what the government directs. I wouldn't want my own children with any other kind of teacher.

*You teach who you are.* You teach who you are and were as a son or daughter. That's an important part of completing your own humanity and a necessary link with the world's most fundamental institution, the family. You teach who you are as a parent and as a relation; if you aren't these things you teach why not, and what you've made of yourself instead. Even if never a word is said about it you teach these things loud and clear. Teaching who you are leads toward wholeness—in yourself as well as your student. And if we don't strain toward wholeness, what is the point of teaching at all besides a paycheck?

All that I worked for throughout my thirty-year teaching career was to make myself whole. I can't say I totally succeeded, but I never stopped trying. That helps to explain my otherwise shocking confession that nothing I did in the classroom wasn't directly useful to me. I approached my teaching on a daily basis with the question "What's in this for me?" The fallout from my struggles to become whole was the only thing I had to give my students.

The kids I had the most profound effect upon as a teacher were invariably those who were incomplete in the same way I had been at their age, and those who lacked certain strengths I myself was struggling to learn as an adult. I taught these kids best because I was really teaching myself. Our mutual attempts to solve character problems were the field on which we wrote some notable *academic* successes.

I am suggesting from my experience that much of the prepared curricula, officially approved materials, formal spaces, testing, various specialized licenses, and the rest of the usual school rigmarole is wasteful and irrelevant. *Teaching is some kind of connection between people*, not rules on a piece of paper. It's a continuous demonstration, not tricks of information processing. This is why great parents are the greatest teachers of all. Parents don't communicate with their offspring through drills, blackboard notes, or worksheets, but through dynamic illustrations of who they are and what is important to them.

In order to reinvent the teacher, we must ask ourselves, Who would make the best teachers of our teachers? One resource we've overlooked is old people, who have had years to reflect on who they've been and what they've seen. Here is noble work and real status for millions of the aged. And who better could call attention to what really matters? They could use their own

lives to illustrate where teaching hit the mark and where it missed, what they could have been taught that now, at the end, they realize was missing from their education.

Another untapped resource for educating teachers lies in the failed schoolteachers who are struggling to understand their failure. In my own teaching career, I learned nothing from graduate school and little from good teachers, but I got a world of insight from bitter, disappointed teachers, some of whom became my close friends. They spoke to me, and they will speak to you if they think you care to hear. They will tell you who they might have been and why they were not.

But the single most magnificent resource we've neglected in training our teachers is the huge number of children oppressed by schooling. We ignore them, I think, because we dare not look them in the eye and acknowledge their right to rage at the torment we are inflicting upon them. Instead of excluding them, we should invite them to participate in teacher formation. At last year's Spokane home-school convention, six hundred of the fifteen hundred attendees were children of all ages, who fully entered into all the proceedings. Their energy was dazzling and proper, as it might always be, under the guidance of whole teachers.

It's time to discard the people who hold the business of schooling tight against their chests, time to discount the advice of those who make a good living out of the current system, time to jettison the true believers. Only those dedicated to the struggle for personal, not collective, sovereignty can realistically begin to talk about a different kind of schoolteacher, one who can deliver to children a statement of his or her own aggressive independence. Without that, school reform is a waste of time.