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# Reconfirming the Soul of Teaching

Imagine yourself as a veteran teacher with thirty years of classroom experience. You've seen more than your share of innovations that glitter then fizzle. Years ago you experienced the thrill of becoming involved with a new district project, but it didn't pan out and you got burned. The scars still linger and you're reluctant to risk getting disappointed or hurt again. Better to shut your classroom door and deal with kids in ways your experience has taught will work. After all, why did you become a teacher in the first place? Not to get caught up in every new fad that comes along. Now you don't seem to have a choice. You're feeling pressured by your principal to "teach to the tests." That violates your code of what's right. But so much of what you read and hear says you're wrong. Still, you forge ahead. You pride yourself in viewing each of your young charges as a promise. You do whatever you can to nudge every individual in the right direction. Your motto is "To teach is to touch a life forever." You still believe that, but it doesn't seem to stack up against the realities of hard numerical evidence: percentages, stanines, and quartiles. Like many

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other colleagues, you'll just bide your time. This too shall pass. If not, retirement is always an option. Then what?

The reality is that there are a lot of teachers today who feel this way. To a good teacher, a child is more than a number. The same danger, focusing only on what can be summarized in statistical form, haunts other professions today. A lawyer's client is more than a billing hour. A physician's patient has a life beyond a diagnosis or a disease to be cured. Teaching, like law and medicine, began as a calling, a noble profession with a higher purpose. Reviving that spirit to achieve parity with factory-like images is the less traveled path we now need to follow.

Where does a teacher turn for support and nourishment? Wherever you look, the heart and soul of teaching seems to run a distant second place to the nuts and bolts. Artistry succumbs to the lure of scientific and technical certainty. The formal knowledge base of teaching today seems devoted almost exclusively to methods of instruction, classroom management, or evaluation. Rigorous research-based knowledge is touted as better than grounded experience-derived wisdom. Most research and commentary attempt to link teaching with quantifiable outcomes—teacher as technician or classroom manager.

But there is a parallel conception of teaching conveyed by a multitude of books and articles. Prospective teachers rarely see this yeasty aspect in their preparation programs. Too many seasoned pros are so ground down and shellshocked by relentless reform that this smoldering, idealistic notion is a faded memory. So much of what is available to read as a pick-me-up is dominated by lifeless, technical jargon. But the idea of the teacher as valued mentor lives on, kept alive by tenacious authors who won't cave in.

### **SOULFUL WISDOM**

The artful, teacher-friendly literature emphasizes the expressive, emotional, spiritual side of the profession. Roland Barth (2001) compares the two:

*One set [of writings] consists of the things these teachers must do that give the illusion of compliance and will ensure they do not get fired: fifteen minutes a week of drug instruction, drilling students in preparation for the standardized tests, and so on.*

*The second set of books consists of those matters educators passionately believe in. This is why they entered the profession. These are the things they do that enable them to maintain their self-respect, integrity, passion, and heart: relating a recent summer spent in Italy to a unit on the Renaissance, assisting a student who wants to devise an unusual science experiment. Unfortunately, these days few teachers experience much congruence [or sense of balance] between the two sets of books. (pp. 4–5)*

A journey through the second set of books or articles brings us closer to the existential underbelly of the teaching profession. Rather than flat and pale gray, the language is poetic and hot pink. Words such as heart, soul, passion, and love pepper the pages. Vigor replaces rigor, zest is substituted for sternness, inspiration is valued over discipline, art supercedes science, and play dominates toil in this image of teaching and teachers. A premium is placed on long-term influence rather than short-term effects. Teachers' moral virtue overshadows their official authority.

Parker Palmer (1998) writes,

*The connections made by good teachers are held not in their methods but in their hearts—meaning heart in its ancient sense, as the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self . . . teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart—and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. The courage to teach is the courage to keep one's heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and leaving, requires. (p. 11)*

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Roland Barth (2001) concurs:

*When I was an elementary school teacher and a principal, my colleagues and I experienced our work as a profession, even a calling. At the turn of the twenty-first century, I'm afraid that for all too many it has become a job. As a calling or profession, education offers much. As a job it offers little . . . . What is needed is an invitation to practitioners to bring a spirit or creativity and invention into the schoolhouse. What is needed is a sense of heart. (p. 5)*

Tracy Kidder (1989) concludes, after an in-depth, yearlong study of Chris Zajac, a typical teacher in a traditional New England classroom:

*Teachers usually have no way of knowing that they have made a difference in a child's life, even when they have made a dramatic one. But for children who are used to thinking of themselves as stupid or not worth talking to or deserving rape and beatings, a good teacher can provide an astonishing revelation. A good teacher can give a child at least a chance to feel, "She thinks I'm worth something. Maybe I am." Good teachers put snags in the river of children passing by, and over the years, they redirect hundreds of lives. Many people find it easy to imagine unseen webs of malevolent conspiracy in the world, and they are not always wrong. But there is also an innocence that conspires to hold humanity together, and it is made of people who can never fully know the good that they have done. (pp. 212–213)*

William Ayers (2001) adds a supportive note:

*A teacher needs a brain to break through the cotton wool smothering the mind, to see beyond the blizzard of labels to this specific child, trembling and whole and real, and to this one and then to this. A teacher needs a heart to fully grasp the importance of that gesture, to recognize in the deepest core of your being that every child is precious, each induplicable, the one and*

*only that ever trod this earth, deserving of the best a teacher can give—respect, awe, reverence, commitment. (p. 135)*

Writers like Barth (2001), Palmer (1998), Kidder (1989), and Ayers (2001) are adept at capturing the symbolic depths of teaching practice that more technically oriented authors skim over or miss entirely. Rather than providing concrete prescriptions, they emphasize personal soul-searching that consults the heart instead of the head. It has been said that the heart has a mind of its own. It reinforces the craft knowledge that teachers cull from the trial-and-error experience they accumulate over time. Wisdom looks beyond the information teachers impart and focuses on the between-the-lines influence they have on their young charges. This permanent stamp, for better or worse, is the real “take-away” from the hours, months, and years students spend in the classroom. As a vice president of a large corporation commented, “You’ll never really remember what teachers taught, the subject matter. But you’ll never forget who they were and how they made you feel.”

## SUPPORTIVE FOLKLORE AND NARRATIVES

The written word, even sensitively and passionately penned, conveys only a portion of what teaching is all about. That’s why teachers frequently rely on a venerable oral tradition, passed from generation to generation. Literature is buttressed by stories that reaffirm the elegance and nobility of teaching. Stories are told and retold on the fly and in formal and informal occasions that invite storytellers to spin their tales of triumphs or travails. Either success or failure is fair game since teachers learn from both. More than the written word, stories stick. Listening to these narratives warms the heart and echoes in the soul. But they are like 3M’s Scotch Tape rather than Post-it Notes.

In *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath (2007) highlight the reasons why some ideas endure while others never catch on. Their conclusion is illustrated by contrasting two very different modes

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of communication. The first emphasizes abstract, matter-of-fact reasoning. Close your book and try to relate to the statement,

*Teachers are important because what they convey may have long-lasting consequences for students that may never become obvious until a substantial amount of time has passed and some significant event occurs that calls attention to their important contribution.*

Now try a concrete, detailed example with picture words:

*I left the classroom anticipating a retirement of sleeping late, tending my roses, and traveling the U.S. and abroad. For awhile it was great and then, with time on my hands, I began to reflect on what my life has meant. What did I have to show for a lot of hours spent with kids? Nothing came up except I had much less retirement income than my neighbors. Then one day the doorbell rang. I opened the door and instantly recognized one of my former students. He had his wife and daughter with him. His wife had made a cake; his daughter presented me with a handmade, primary crayon illustrated certificate, "Thanks for helping my daddy."*

Now close your book and ponder how long you'll remember the message.

It is the same exact idea with two very different ways of expressing it. One has little lasting impact; the other has a robust, lingering afterlife. In their book *Crow and Weasel*, Lopez and Pohrt (1998) write,

*Remember only this one thing,  
The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them.  
If stories come to you, care for them.  
And learn to give them away when needed.  
Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.  
That is why we put stories in each other's memories.  
This is how people care for themselves.*

Stories capture those lovely little intangibles that give teaching unique buoyancy and zest. True or not, narratives

stick with us. Folklore, told, retold, and embellished over time, transmits the enduring spiritual give and take, connecting the inner lives of those who spend their careers in classrooms. The magical exchange happens in elementary and secondary classrooms, in higher education, and in informal settings outside school. The magic can be traced back to the encounters between guru and novice, craftsman and apprentice, wizard and seeker:

*Mentors and apprentices are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of teaching's great rewards is to get back on the dance floor. It is the dance of the spiraling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn. (Palmer, 1998, p. 25)*

Knowledge and tradition are passed on through teaching and learning prances and twirls. But even more important, in the rhythmic frolic the soul of the teacher touches the soul of the student. This intangible intermingling of passion with fond recollections, the occasional chuckle or tear, and a glimmer of direction is tattooed permanently onto the student's heart to be called on when happenstance presents a need. "Today is the day our passion and our dream become one. Because now without a doubt we know that we have the responsibility to grab a young kid by the hand and teach him or her how to find their rightful place in the world" (Gruwell, 1999, p. 262).

## BUMBLING PASSION

The two of us know this ancient dance and its enduring traces firsthand. In our freshman year at La Verne College, we had a history professor. His name was Walter F. Myers, not Dr. Myers, because he did not have an advanced degree, but he

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knew more about history than anyone. He seemed to believe that knowledge should command ultimate respect, not three letters after your name. His appearance and demeanor were quirky, out of style with even the most sartorially lacking and behaviorally challenged academic.

He always arrived to class about three minutes late. If you were also running behind schedule you might see him roar up in his open war-surplus military jeep looking for just any place to park. He would park almost anywhere, legally or otherwise, and fly frenetically across the lawn, up the steps of Founder's Hall. For students already in their seats, the classroom door would suddenly fly open introducing a disheveled man, sloppily dressed in an ensemble of coat, tie, and pants that never matched. Pants legs were cut too short revealing socks that had lost their elastic months ago. His tousled grey hair and intense, jiggly eyes behind thick glasses made him appear as though he had just been through a violent windstorm. His scuffed, overstuffed, brown briefcase was tucked firmly under his right arm as if protecting his teaching materials from harm or pilferage. His intensity established him as someone fully ready to do something of extreme urgency.

He slammed his briefcase on the lectern and stormed across the room to fling open the same window each class period, no exceptions. He returned to the lectern and rummaged through his briefcase for the handmade charts, deadly accurate, but nearly impossible to follow. He began class as the Great Inquisitor, calling on students, alphabetically arranged, to answer questions on the voluminous list of recommended readings on reserve in the library. Every person was petrified that he would direct a question their way. No answers were ever put down or dismissed, but it was evident that you were on the right track when he put a mark after your name. You couldn't fake it with Professor Myers. His photographic memory commanded every detail of the readings.

His exams were single-spaced, testing your grasp of specific dates and events. Occasionally, you were asked to construct a detailed map of an entire region. His lectures were

boring, but occasionally enlivened with personal examples. His presence at the opening of King Tut's tomb was electrifying. His home movie of the Dardanelles taken at dusk from a rowboat was a hardly discernable up and down alternation between the dark sea and a pale gray horizon. It made some people seasick. Other than that we can't recall much of the content he taught.

But there was something about Walter Myers that you couldn't quite put your finger on at the time. There was something mystical in the interplay between his encyclopedic grasp of history and his bumbling personal manner. The magic stuck with us. He touched us somewhere deep inside. He transmitted an abiding passion for human richness of the past and his example influenced our decision to become history majors. He somehow showed us that he cared. He didn't fit the conventional academic model. He was more like an iconic Mr. Chips than a standard, pedantic research historian. Lacking his doctorate, he was eventually asked to leave the college. But to us his legacy lives on. He was a great teacher.

## CACOPHONY OF THEOLOGIES

Voices extolling the emotional and spiritual viewpoint of teaching are clear and consistent. They are welcome music to the ears of teachers, principals, parents, and others who care deeply about the overall well-being of young people. But given the nature of school reform policies over the years, most recently the NCLB legislation and rollout, national and state legislators are attuned to a different channel of discourse. They pay attention to aggregated data, not stories. They believe in tightening up the structure of schools and improving the technical aspects of instruction. They rely heavily on standardized numbers to measure progress on a limited set of skills. Theirs is a bird's-eye view looking at an objectified panoramic picture. This remote appraisal often overlooks the joyful and grim realities of what is going on at the grassroots

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level in local schools and individual classrooms. Unintended consequences often fall outside their range of view. Sometimes, the side effects are not that obvious. Just as often they're overlooked because reform policies support political agendas of presidents and governors.

But a bottom-up view often tells another story. It sees all the blemishes and messes in an up close, detailed, and intensely emotional panorama. Costs of reform are easy to calculate because they are real and personal. From the grounded view of the trenches we are paying a dear and costly price as NCLB and other efforts force us to make schools more rational and classrooms more accountable for direct results of a limited set of skills. For the first time, the law provides muscle to make sure results materialize. Change efforts also encourage a narrow conception of what it means to be a teacher. Reform policies force, as Noddings (2007) points out, "Hardworking teachers [to try] to get unwilling, unprepared students through material they have no interest in learning. Many youngsters have alternative, genuine talents, but these are disregarded" (p. 31). Neglect leads to frustration, tuning off, and dropping out the very outcomes the current legislation intends to prevent. To most teachers, making a difference means more than raising a school's aggregate performance on standardized yardsticks measuring students' academic growth.

One of the disconnects between the "other" set of books or stories and parents interested in education only for its career-enhancing value and policymakers too often concerned about their political careers is competing mind-sets about the nature of teaching. From a purely instrumental view, literature extolling the chief virtues of education as a heartfelt, soulful undertaking is seen as overly romantic, frilly new age babble. In turn, overly anxious or ambitious parents and policymakers are portrayed as hard-nosed, hyperrational, or out of touch with what students really need and the life-fulfilling role teachers play. The tug-of-war between the two theologies creates two self-sealing worlds that compete for supremacy. Policymakers control the outer fringes; classroom teachers,

often surreptitiously, dominate the inner core. But for American education to make its ideal impact, legislators and parents need to consult the other set of books and teachers need to do a better job of selling the remarkable influence they wield in a young person's development. Otherwise we are headed for a hidden disaster that lies ahead, unaware of more promising alternatives.

### THE MIRACLE OF SATURN

A mistaken notion that threats and tangible rewards shape behavior enjoys great currency in educational reform. The ironic working theme seems to be, "The beatings will continue until morale improves." That same mind-set governed General Motor's attitude toward its workers in the 1980s. The top-down approach almost guaranteed that people on the assembly line would mindlessly go through the motions or, even worse, creatively sabotage the quality of cars produced. Powerful unions kept wages high and working conditions reasonably predictable. The American consumers paid the price when they purchased a car. Compared to foreign imports it was a lousy, unreliable form of transportation.

Somebody at General Motors had a better idea—an automobile manufacturing plant with a soul. A representative group of workers, managers, union representatives, and others (The Gang of 99) toured the business world searching for ways to put some substantive flesh on the philosophical bones. The group distilled disparate ideas into a cohesive and unique new manufacturing way of life and Saturn was born. It was billed as "a different kind of company building a different kind of car."

Disgruntled, dispirited, and laggard GM workers were placed in a new environment of trust and cooperation. They were asked for ideas rather than ordered to conform. Teams were able to determine the way they worked. Quality became a communal watchword rather than a top-down command. Workers took pride in the cars being assembled and thought

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about the consumers who would ultimately drive their vehicles on the way to work, during their vacations, or while taking the kids to school. Monetary rewards were based on the performance of the company en bloc. But the intangible payoff of positive feedback from Saturn owners was of premium worth.

For a homecoming event, 44,000 Saturn owners drove to the Spring Hill plant one summer to see where their car was born and to thank the people who built it. In turn workers were able to show their gratitude for “believing in us.” A line worker summed up the Saturn experience, “You know, given the chance, anyone prefers to make a perfect product. At Saturn they’ve given us the [opportunity], they’ve given us that chance. (Saturn Video-TV commercial)

Perhaps it’s time for education to heed the lessons of Saturn. For decades, educational reform, with its top-down, standardized, and punitive attitude has fallen shy of expectations. Why not give schools and teachers some latitude in fixing the problems everyone agrees have become acute? The pathway to improvement will not be straight and smooth. It will be tortuous, rocky, and full of snags and disappointments. But if we assume, following the lead of Saturn, that everyone—given the chance—would like to produce a perfect outcome, we may be well advised to extend a new opportunity to educators. If a car company can have soul and automobile workers heart, why not schools and teachers? But that will only be possible if we yet again believe in teachers and they once more believe in themselves.