

THE TEACHER AND THE PROFESSION

Public opinion polls tell us that the teaching profession is perceived as one of our most essential professions. These same sources, however, indicate that the profession lacks prestige. It is good for our ego that literature has from time to time sprung loose teaching personalities who have captured the reader's imagination. Chaucer speaks of the clerk "whose talk centered on moral themes, and gladly would he learn and gladly teach". One of Goldsmith's influential figures in the English shires before the herders drove out the dwellers was the village schoolmaster whose body language said it all: "Well had the boding tremblers learned to trace the day's disaster in his morning face". And Carlyle gave kudos to anyone who graced the classroom as he wrote that teachers should be world-honored and treated as generals or field marshals.

As mentioned, the profession has not generally received good publicity. Through the years teachers too often have been considered pedagogues in the original sense of servants who lead children to and from school. In ancient Greece, the philosophers were the honored teachers while those who taught reading and writing were generally ignored. In the traditional Chinese school of old, the schoolmaster was by definition a person who had failed intellectually. The Russian theological seminaries expelled their undesirables who were then assigned to teach in the common schools under Peter the Great. In Frederick the Great's Prussia invalids were assigned to teach.¹

The poor opinion of the teaching profession spread to the New World in the seventeenth century. This could be seen by the low prices that the newly-arrived indentured servants commanded in the market place. Teachers were not considered to be valuable investments. And today high esteem still eludes the profession. This may be due to society's prevailing bias, the short-preparation period for teachers compared to that of other professions, and the union focus

which causes people to wonder if our work truly qualifies as a profession.

But, let's face it! We all can remember being influenced by great teaching. The power of these good teachers is difficult to measure because their influence continues to grow in us. We must not forget that our classrooms also are filled with "students who are the messages that we send to a future we will not see".² So, let's sit back for a moment, relax, read, and enjoy some reflection on good teaching and the legacy that each of us can leave to those who come into our classrooms.

Marva Collins, the lady who started a private school in Chicago's west side ghetto, is one of the great ones. She states that she is pushed on by experiencing the feeling of epiphany in her students. She jolts her students, and they feel that they are leading a more quickened life because of her enthusiasm. She takes the dropouts of the public and private schools and starts them reading Emerson's *Essay on Self-Reliance*. She gives her students a pride, a belief, a hope, and these students soon discover that they too can learn.³

Martin Buber once stated that the greatest thing that one person can do for another is to confirm the deepest thing that person has within him/her. And following up on this idea, Douglas Steere, observes that there is little more to say about the greatest thing that a teacher can do for a student. That teacher can believe in the student; he/she can have faith, especially at times when all the conventional indicators point the other way in the student; he/she can affirm the deepest thing the student has within himself/herself. "That teacher lit my candle".⁴

A recent journal article in reflecting on good teachers said: "When teaching is artful, one sees a sense of wonder, and excitement in the subject matter, the free play of the imagination, a what-if vision of the world, an evoking of the unknown, and synthesis".⁵

Jonathan Kozol described the hidden curriculum as the teacher's own integrity and lived conviction. The most memorable lesson is not what is written by the student on a sheet of yellow lined paper in the lesson pad; nor is it the clumsy sentence published in the official text. It is the message that is written in a teacher's eyes throughout the course of his or her career. It is the lesson which endures a lifetime.⁶

A good teacher is self-confident. Teaching is being on show. It is challenging a student's ideas, an arrogant art if you are not well informed. It is being an oracle, passing along truths to less knowledgeable folk who depend on their teacher's accuracy. It is playing God, because a teacher's attitudes and expectations can pro-

foundly affect young people, particularly the most vulnerable among them. You are reassured when your students do well on other people's tests or when they use in their future education the skills you taught them. You are reassured when students seek your advice, or when colleagues watch your students and your classes and respect what is happening.⁷

And one of my favorite teacher stories... "My boy wants to spend five months at your school", the farmer said to Professor Grundvig, founder of the famous Folk School in Denmark. "However, I've looked over your course of studies, and I see only such courses as history, literature, civics, geography, and science. Nothing about farming. Tell me, will my son be a better farmer after he takes this program with you?" Professor Grundvig was silent for a moment, then replied

quietly, "No, your son won't learn how to make better butter at our Folk School. But all his life he will be ashamed to make bad butter".⁸ Good teachers like these cannot be ordered out of a catalog!

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¹ Alma WITTLIN, "The Teacher", *Daedalus*, Vol. 92, pp. 745-763.

² Neil POSTMAN. Quotation attributed to this author.

³ Marva COLLINS, *Marva Collins Way* (Houghton Mifflin, Co.).

⁴ Douglas STEERE, *Confirming the Deepest Thing in Another* (Pamphlet).

⁵ E. DUCHARME & M. KLUENDER, "Good Teachers in Good Schools" *Educational Leadership*, October 1986, pp. 43-44.

⁶ Jonathan KOZOL, *On Being a Teacher* (Continuum Publishers), p. 20.

⁷ Theodore SIZER, *Horace's Compromise* (Houghton Mifflin, Co), p. 181.

⁸ Eugene GROLLMES, *Vows But No Walls* (B. Herder Co.), p. 171.