

AN ETHOS OF FEAR

Is it possible: an «apostolic succession» of teachers who pass on the same wounds to students year after year?

A year ago I experienced one of those rare educational exchanges which, like a recurring musical theme keeps teasing the mind, will sooner or later break out for others to hear.

The setting for this meeting was an apartment on the outskirts of Madison, WI. The dramatis personae were Parker Palmer, Robert McCann, FSC, and I. Palmer, a Quaker Writer, teacher, lecturer and sociologist, introduced us to the Quaker approach to education and shared with us his strong personal insights on the art of teaching. We were impressed! Bob and I, in turn, spoke of Lasallian Christian Education which is being kept alive by Brothers and Associates in our schools today. He was impressed! We sipped herbal tea, talked of our roles in education today, and energized one another through the experiences which we shared.

Palmer spoke of his concern about the ethos of fear which pervades some classrooms today. He felt that fear weakens learning and that it should be foreign to Christian schools where "Be-Not-Afraid" Christians have gathered to learn. He wondered if in some schools there is something like an "apostolic succession" of teachers who pass on the same wounds to students year after year.

Our meeting prompted me to recall the story that the Russian writer, Anton Chekhov, once told about

a man who tried to train a kitten to catch mice. Whenever the kitten refused to give chase, the man beat it. After the kitten grew up into an adult cat, it always cowered in terror in the presence of a mouse. «That man who beat that cat,» says Chekhov's character, «is the man who taught me Latin.» (1)

Fear, as described in this paper, is the straight dictionary definition –a feeling of agitation or anxiety which is caused by the perceived presence of or nearness to danger. Removing fear in the classroom does not mean removing orderliness or discipline. A healthy respect for the teacher, for fellow students, and for the whole learning process is essential to a good school. A consideration of fear does, however, have something to say about the bearing and stance of the teacher, the style and method of teaching, and the attitudes which the teacher projects to the students about their personal worth.

Anxiety and agitation may be introduced into a class in many ways. A teacher's authoritarian approach, a shouting and screaming technique, the constant "mark-book" threat held over the students, corporal punishment or the promise thereof, and that sometimes forgotten conveyor of fear, sarcasm. Sarcasm (from the Greek Sarkasmos –to tear the flesh) may, in the long run, be more hurtful to the students than a slap or two. Secure teachers will never belittle students in the process of teaching or correcting them.

It seems reasonable to assume that fear resides in every student at some time during the learning process. So why not find out why and where it exists? A very helpful method is the use of an anxiety scan sheet (sample enclosed). Brother David Delahanty introduced me to this technique years ago at one of the Huether Workshop sessions. I have been forever grateful to him and have used it in every class since that time. Its power to set the stage for real learning came quickly to my attention in a class of public school teachers in a northern Minnesota community. The course, Ethics in Education, was an elective these teachers chose as a group. By this selection they felt they were daring to add a stronger ingredient to their graduate program though they were not quite certain what this would demand of them. I credit the anxiety-scan-sheet-approach with creating a most positive teaching/learning experience.

These anxiety scan sheets should be home-made with each teacher adding his/her own personal flavor and adapting them to the class, subject, and other variables. The enclosed sheet is so drawn up that if a high rating is given to either A, D, or G, the course itself is the cause of the anxiety. If B or H received a high rating, it would mean that the teacher is perceived as the cause of the students' misgivings. A high rating to C, E, F, or I indicates that the students feel some personal inadequacy or lack of preparation for the

course. In each instance the fear expressed needs to be addressed for better learning.

If the course is the culprit, it needs better sketching. Methods for studying the content will certainly be part of the correction. Fear of the teacher must be dealt with up front. The teacher must be secure enough to explain his/her teaching style, the demands of the course, and then listen in an understanding way to the students. Students need to realize however, that their growth depends upon challenges and that removing fear does not mean removing hard work. If the fear arises because of the students' personal doubt about success they will need strong affirmation and encouragement. This comes quite naturally if teachers are running classes where kids are free to make mistakes without fear of ridicule.

The school year is in progress. Is it possible to introduce this approach now? Yes, and please do! You may find that you are in tune with the class, and this is great. It is also a possibility that you have been working off your own agenda and have presumed a readiness in your students which is not there. A certain byproduct is that the students will feel honored that you consulted with them in their struggles. In this way your classroom will be an amiable place for the «BE-NOT-AFRAID» learners to gather.

Bro. Terence McLaughlin

(1) Patrick Welsh, Tales Out of School, p. 50.

ANXIETY SCAN SHEET

ED 807T – LEADERSHIP 6 ETHICS

Rank in order three topics which are listed below and which might be giving you the greatest anxiety as you begin this course. Number them, #1, #2, #3.

- _____ (a) The topic, ethics, scares me.
- _____ (b) The teacher may not understand my needs.
- _____ (c) I have little background for a discussion of Ethics.
- _____ (d) The class might become "religious indoctrination."
- _____ (e) Will I be able to absorb all the material in six weeks?
- _____ (f) I am hesitant to speak in a group about my values.
- _____ (g) The course might be theoretical and not practical for me.
- _____ (h) I am not certain how demanding the teacher will be.
- _____ (i) I may not be able to use in my school what I learn in this course.
- _____ (j) Other: _____

My personal goals for this course are: _____

