Teachers: The Ruby Slippers

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Unwittingly and en masse, the lot of teaching in America has arrived at its Dorothy moment. The great authority Oz (the Federal Government) has given us an important charge (increase test scores). We have battled the wicked witch (the achievement gap) and returned with her broomstick anticipating a great reward. Unfortunately, we soon discover the fakery involved in Oz's authority over our local schools' mission and the false hope it has generated. But we don't despair because we have come face-to-face with a profound truth: achieving excellence in education—culturing a brain, swelling a heart, instilling courage, or just plain getting a student home—was always about the shoes. Or, at least, the people that fill them. And, especially, that the real power of transformation was within our grasp all along.

In point of fact, despite calls for reform from right and left, wonkery and grandstanding in Washington, and research studies of every stripe and flavor, there is one truth with which everyone agrees: the number one factor governing educational achievement by students is the quality of teacher in the classroom. That is why NCLB requires "highly qualified" teachers in every subject, at every school. It is also why individual States experiment with incentive pay, job-embedded in-service, and ways to make teaching a more…well… "professional" profession—with increased responsibility, longer school years, and a

more appealing career ladder. Minnesota educators understand this: the governor, along with the legislature and school districts, developed Q-Comp in 2005, a ground-breaking merit-pay proposal that is already in effect in a handful of districts.

So, inevitably, despite the raucous hue and cry, we gravitate back to a single question without an answer to which no real progress will ever be made in education: *What makes a teacher effective as a professional?*

This article will propose, in a kind of Dorothian way, that it is precisely the personal element in teaching which yields the best results. That, in fact, looking elsewhere or giving authority away when the answer lies within is a prescription for chasing fool's gold. And further, that in training, developing and coaching young educators, maximum attention must be paid to building their personal sense of mission, fortifying their unique strengths and giving them the kind of support, latitude and experiences that most develop their human potential. In short, we need to conceive of teaching the same way we should be conceiving of learning for students: as a process of fully developing unique abilities, assets and potential in individuals, then trusting that "whole" person to respond in original and dynamic ways to challenges confronted in the larger world.

I. Giving Schools The Business

For decades, most professions have sought to diminish or even eliminate shadings of personal identity, flavor or sentiment in employees. This is the logical extension of the "business model" where, by dint of training, efficiency and market forces, only ruthlessly lean and mean organizations deliver cost-effective services and products to customers. Little weight or time is given to personality, creativity or ideas. The job is to do the job, not hob-nob or revel in the task, and, thus, effectiveness is measured tangibly: costs, sales, production efficiency, resource inputs, etc.

Interestingly, since the landmark report *A Nation At Risk* (1983), business-leaders and politicians have wanted to bring a kind of business ethos to the task of public education. Thus, the efficiency of schools and their bureaucracies was held up for criticism; methods, curriculum and, especially the "product" (i.e. the

students) were called into question. Many still argue that what is needed is to adopt the business model in education: control every step in the production process until the end result measures up—and, if not, start over, eliminate problems, get the job done right.

As rational and well-intentioned as this may sound, it is, for lack of a more nuanced term, wrong. Terribly wrong. It should be, by now, cliché to point out that students are not products, test scores are not end-points of learning, and schools will not be whipped into shape by tougher managers, strict control, or the organized fomenting of public panic.

And, in any case, the question of excellence is always about a teacher in the room, the students, and what makes him or her effective. This has nothing to do with the business-model, as private schools, like their public counterparts, face the same critical challenge every day and have not fared much better—once adjusting for their decisive advantages in clientele, resources and self-chosen mission.[1]

It is my thesis that, at this historic moment, we need, more than ever, to put our faith in the humanity of the teaching/learning experience—what you might call our Ruby Slippers. For three critical reasons, we need to see education, unlike a business operation, as a process that is open-ended, highly personal and dependent upon relationship within a team or community. In the end, the true "business" of education is not to serve business, but to serve the spiritual, developmental and meaning-making needs of the people within it. And, counter-intuitively enough, if we do that, young people will be better prepared for the rapidly changing and highly competitive economy of the 21st century than if we continue with endless testing and intrusive mandates that make education unappealing, even unlikable, for student and teacher alike.

II. What is personal is indispensable

> *Authority is granted to people who are perceived as authoring their own words, their own actions, their own lives, rather than playing a scripted role at great remove from their own hearts. When teachers depend on*

> *the coercive powers of law or technique, they have no authority at all.* (Palmer 33)

The first law of teaching is to earn respect from students. This can be accomplished variously, though subject mastery, verbal command and force of reputation seem most common. In any case, it is true, as Parker Palmer suggests, that lasting authority is not won by repairing to standard lines or institutional rules, but by a kind of personal comfort with leading a class forward into ideas, discussion and experience—and being trusted to do so in a unique and fruitful way.

Paradoxically, the truth is, virtually every specific fact, reading and lesson elicited by a teacher will be forgotten by students over time, and in most cases within weeks. Thus, content mastery accumulated by a teacher, while impressive and effective in the moment, does not form, in and of itself, the bulk of what a student "gets" from that teacher. In fact, what students value and remember most about effective teachers is much more relational and implicit, rather than isolated, discreet or explicit. And more, cached within that relational and implicit radiance are the very striking and unique personal qualities of the teacher.

When I reflect upon those teachers who became instrumental to me as mentors, it is almost exclusively their unique personal qualities that stand out. Mr. Burns was a strapping Scotsman and historian who loved to laugh and lampoon remote characters and situations from American history. Nothing was too sacrosanct to escape his rapier wit and rapacious sweep of understanding. Long, wispy strands of orangish hair rolled off the back of his balding dome, making him seem a jocular gnome. Ms. Ayers was an aged but well-read and highly intellectual spinster whose quixotic and well-lined face reminded me of a mime. She quizzed herself as much as anyone wrestling with the high modern era of Woolf, Joyce, Conrad, Mann, et al. Each inspired through their devotion and integrity for finding rich and rewarding material, areas where they could delineate shades of meaning or locate a kind of sweet intimacy of knowing. I perceived little of this at the time, but now realize how crucial they were in forging a template which eventually proved invaluable to me for teaching.

So it is that the most salient aspect of teaching is also the least contrived: the individual character of the teacher. It is precisely this that strikes the student as being so original and specific to their life-experience that it is treasured, sealed up in a vase of memory and serves as a kind of Ur-text on how to proceed when alone in the field of human inquiry. None of this can be devised, faked or created. A good teacher brings wholeness in all its natural beauty to the job of teaching and is never afraid to reveal it to others.

> *The challenge of teaching is to decide who you want to be as a teacher, what you care about and what you value, and how you will conduct yourself in classrooms with students. It is to name yourself as a teacher, knowing that institutional realities will only enable that goal in part (if at all) and that the rest is up to you.* (Ayers 23)

Uniqueness, even to the point of personal embellishment, is vital to teaching because the implicit and fundamental theme of education is about finding your own way of doing things: fully realizing the potential that is yours and yours alone.

III. Above all, a sense of passion

> *We can, and do, make education an exclusively outward enterprise, forcing students to memorize and repeat facts without ever appealing to their inner truth—and we get predictable results: many students never want to read a challenging book or think a creative thought once they get out of school. The kind of teaching that transforms people does not happen if the student's inner world is ignored.* (Palmer 31)

There is no higher end for learning than taking a particular pursuit to the level of excellence: one that is well informed, scrupulously detailed and rigorously open to truth. Being "caught" by intricacy and aesthetics of a subject results in pushing forward and developing new possibilities, whether they end as economic, intellectual or spiritual events. This is the ultimate goal of learning, the finish line which seems so

distant when students set off from their marks in Kindergarten.

How does it happen? Inspiration. Wonder. Curiosity. The exact things which are extant in the young child are crucial to the brilliant scholar. As highly educated as we become, the natural and inherent qualities of humanness are our primary sources of motivation and satisfaction. Undergirding this is a deep, abiding pool of passion—the place we go, like no other, that offers us energy, meaning and fulfillment.

It is a truism to assert that passion is highly personal. In education, what makes for one student's trash is inevitably another's treasure. The richer and more important question is: How do we ignite passion in young people? And here, once again, the touchstone is a teacher's personal character, vision and determination. When a teacher communicates a sense of passion, their love of beauty or reverence for a topic or field, it poses a challenge to the student to look at that material deeply for themselves. Do they see something similar? Is it true about Da Vinci's drawings or the structure of the human vertebrae?

> *Passion for the subject, throws that subject, not the teacher, into the center of the learning circle—and when a great thing is in their midst, students have direct access to the energy of learning and of life*. (Palmer 120)

Humans are meaning-makers. We feed on personal connections we feel for the objects of our affection. When in the throes of passionate pursuit, time stands still, as well as necessities like food or sleep. We become Einstein on the train, lost in contemplation, his wife's oversized note pinned to him informing the conductor of his destination. Probably each of the world's great accomplishments in science, art, math and religion were realized by a passionate—and personal—connection between someone and their object of delight. There is not one way to do this; pathways are multiple and open to unique approach.

The same is true of teaching. It is by authentic, specific and concrete originality that a teacher attracts interest in students. Faking it, going through motions or imitating others won't get it done. And neither will reading a script, a la Edison schools, or telling stu-

dents that they need to learn something because it's on the exam:

> *The child who wants to know something remembers it and uses it once he has it; the child who learns something to please or appease someone else forgets it when the need for pleasing or the danger of not appeasing is past.* (Holt 289)

In a competitive, abundant and disposable world economy, only excellence is indispensable. This is one asset that is in constant demand. Thus, the job of teaching, more than ever, is to inspire learners to tap deep-seated passion so that they desire learning for its own sake and pursue excellence with vigor and abandon. It is always and only when the fuse is lit that the learner does for herself far more than we could imagine. In a sense, this makes teaching a lot simpler, though in no sense does it make it any easier: inspire a student's personal passion, then simply get out of the way.

IV. Join Us, Won't You?

Objectivity makes us far more vulnerable emotionally than compassion or a simple humanity. Objectivity separates us from the life around us and within us….Physicians [and teachers] pay a terrible personal price for their hard-won objectivity. Objectivity is not whole. In the objective stance no one can draw on their own human strengths, no one can cry, or accept comfort, or find meaning, or pray…Life is the ultimate teacher, but it is usually through experience and not scientific research that we discover its deepest lessons (Remen 78-80).

I once heard an educator list the three most important aspects of teaching: 1.) relationship; 2.) relationship; 3.) relationship. Despite the rest of this article's high-minded rhetoric, nothing trumps the reality that good teaching is dependent upon good relationships—and that they, in turn, are dependent upon personal qualities in the teacher. This does not mean that a teacher is 'best friend' to students or that relations require high-degrees of intimacy or personal sharing. It means that there must be trust running both ways, and that it be clear the teacher has a *personal* interest in a student's success—not just in school but in life itself.

Young people are in great need of quality relationships, whatever their situation at home—and today, more than ever, home-life is a crap-shoot. Relationships are the one consistent and effective antidote to each of the maladies afflicting young people: reducing pregnancy rates, truancy, substance abuse, suicides and promoting pro-social behaviors like extra-curricular activities, work, community involvement and even higher academic achievement. In fact, researchers have found that having a teacher who cares about them, or just an environment of high expectations, yields improved academic performance and fewer anti-social behaviors among teens.[2] The benefits that flow from relationships—and not just between teachers and students but among students especially—are tangible and hugely beneficial.

Teachers stand at a unique crossroads. On the one hand they are public representatives of an important social institution and the entire concatenation of influence which that affords. On the other, they represent a uniquely personal guide who may be profoundly significant to any given student. It is a complex position to occupy—one that is fraught with dangers of caring too much or too little, of being too tough or too kind, of pushing too hard or too soft. And, as the Rachel Naomi Remen quote makes clear above, there is a personal hazard for instructors: walling themselves in a cocoon of objectivity, a kind of hermetic professionalism, that, in the end, limits human connection and extracts a profound personal price.

Teaching needs to be about creating a nexus of relationships for young people. How the class is structured and run either promotes or limits the students' ability to meet, share and connect with peers. Moreover, how the teacher interacts, prods, pushes, holds back and generally navigates personal exchanges is a tremendous source of modeling, skillful or unskillful, for youngsters. From methods to feelings to means of expression, the roots of effective relationships are personal and emerge from the individual character of the instructor.

Like many things, there is not an absolute right or wrong way to do this. There are unique and personally effective ways, as well as well-intentioned (hopefully) approaches

that fail. Attempts to identify beneficial behaviors and response patterns—which I think are tremendously valuable—would necessitate a much longer treatment. Nonetheless, as a child of a large family, and someone who has stumbled to a certain level of effectiveness, I want to highlight three things.

First, the importance of listening. For a young person, to be heard is to be valued; to be unheard is the same as being value-less. There is tremendous healing, growth and transformation that happens in allowing each youngster to exit their shell and share a piece of identity, with adult or peer. Making sure that every student has a chance—and at times, is required to share—is more fundamental to teaching and learning than any activity I can think of. And when students do share, voluntarily or involuntarily, it needs to be clear that people are listening, that genuine "care" exists for that student:

> *Listening is the oldest and perhaps the most powerful tool. It is often through the quality of our listening and not the wisdom of our words that we are able to effect the most profound changes in the people around us. When we listen, we offer with our attention an opportunity for wholeness. Our listening creates sanctuary for the homeless parts within the other person. That which has been denied, unloved, devalued by themselves and by others….In this culture, the soul and the heart too often go homeless.* (Remen 219-220)

Second, the truly crucial thing in responding to students is to come from a place of authenticity and genuine concern, not as a representative of an institution. This is the basis of a true relationship with students, the way they gauge whether they are worth caring about or not. Young people are unaccustomed to the world of adults, to closing down feelings or ignoring needs in others to complete a task. More than anything, youngsters at school are seeking what it is to be a full person—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually—and how to do it in a way that allows for individual identity. Their connection and relationships with

adults, and especially teachers, alert them to boundaries and the realities of human interaction while simultaneously promoting their sense of being valued for who they are. This implicit acceptance, already discussed above, provides a kind of loving halo that promotes personal growth and integrated development.

Third, as much as anything, promoting relationships is about creating a larger sense of team or community. Students are able to bond more completely when they share a sense of purpose or belonging. That's why team sports, activity groups and school organizations are crucial to a school's identity and spirit. In fact, there is a strong inclination in all people to belong to something larger than themselves—a family, a community, a church or political organization. Why schools and teachers ignore or devalue this is one of the epic mistakes in public education, and the exact reason why the "small school movement" is winning hearts and minds, parents and educators alike. Small is beautiful because it allows for common goals and identity.

In my courses, I use cooperative groups to build this sense of purpose and togetherness. To me, it seems effortless and common-place that students share in significant ways with peers they barely know, or that discussions blast through walls of superficiality and convention to genuine risk-taking. It can be done, but only with real trust in the equanimity of the teacher and the overall ethos established in the room. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that important relationships happen more frequently and bonding occurs more completely if there is an understanding that the whole is greater than its sum of parts. In a way, that is as much a part of the job of teaching as anything: creating safe harbor and common cause from a random cross-section of local humanity.

There's No Place Like Home

The trajectory of recent American history suggests that more than ever economic, and particularly corporate, values and concerns have come to predominate. As a reflection of the larger society, schools too appear to be taking on the premises of modern economics: measuring inputs against outputs and weighing the worth of investment versus return. At times, this seems like

a particularly frightening social development, one not unlike that depicted in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* or George Orwell's *1984*. We are literally talking about the worth of human beings to our society, and how much to spend so that they might be happy, fulfilling and healthy. In an important new book, *A Whole New Mind*, Daniel Pink describes a looming and profound change in economic eras he believes is about to sweep the industrialized world. Namely, that left-brained linear functions, such as those favored on standardized tests, will no longer be the basis of economic vitality because such functions are merely routine and easily executed by low-paid employees abroad. Rather, it is the creative, aesthetic and fully integrated right-brain skill-set which will be the source of innovation and economic vitality in the future—principally because human beings will seek a return to meaning-making activities like narrative, play, spirituality and design. If Pink is right, and I believe that he is, what becomes essential in educating young people is that they learn to think, feel and create for themselves—that they come to believe in their uniqueness, the power of collaboration, and the importance of integrating life around a vision that is both purposeful and fulfilling. That happens most readily in a classroom where the teacher exhibits wholeness of their own character, the joy, passion and play derived from being hard at work helping others find a way. Nothing is more contingent or personal.

We live at a momentous time, one that is fraught with peril as much as possibility. While the American public demands "accountability" from schools and a very narrow level of proficiency, educators must remain alert to the larger and more lasting needs of those in our care—what are, first and foremost, human beings. To acquiesce to the premise that all will be fine if only test scores improve is to indulge in the fantasy that the great Wizard will solve all our problems. And to pass on to students the sense that education—like life—is a bland and heartless accumulation of what other people tell you to do is to turn our back on Dorothy's epic discovery and what each of us understands reflexively: namely, that the power of transformation lies within us, and that its awakening is the one great purpose of education.

Notes

1.http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/studies/2006461.asp, The Nation's Report Card, National Assessment of Educational Progress, *Comparing Private and Public Schools Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling*, authors Henry Braun, Frank Jenkins and Wendy Grigg, July 2006.

2.http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/05/051018.voisin.shtml, *Teacher Concern Associated With Reduced Anti-social Behavior Among Troubled Teens,* Dexter Voisin, October 30th, 2005. http://www.mdrc.org/publications/419/overview.html, *Student Context, Student Attitudes and Behavior, and Academic Achievement: An Exploratory Analysis*, Theresa M. Akey, January 2006.

Annotated Bibliography

Gatto, John Taylor. *Dumbing Us Down*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992.

A stunning, brilliant peek into the mind of a celebrated and gifted teacher of young children. Gatto's essays remind us that what we don't know can often be our undoing—and that, in most cases, running America's schools like factories and prisons ends up reinforcing the exact negative outcomes in kids we are attempting to avoid.

Ayers, Williams. *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*. New York: Teacher's College Press, 2001.

The accumulated wisdom of an educator whose life included involvement in the original Weather Underground. Bill Ayers has been in education for the last 30-plus years, working with young people in a variety of professional settings. In this wide-ranging book, Ayers produces a clear and honest appraisal of the role of a teacher, the obstacles in our path, and the best approach-

es he has found for engaging the body, mind and spirit of those in our charge.

Holt, John. *How Children Fail*. Cambridge: Perseus Publishing Group, 1982.

Originally published in 1964, Holt's journals go all the way back to the late 1950's, when the author and his colleague, Bill Hull, were first describing the reasons why young children failed in school. Their ground-breaking conclusion: *the system was failing our children* by not engaging their essential meaning needs as human beings. A must read for educators who think they are alone or unique in resisting today's high-stakes testing environment.

Palmer, Parker. *The Courage To Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998.

Palmer, a Quaker and long-time sociologist at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, provides a penetrating self-reflection on the inner world of a teacher: his doubts, triumphs, longings and failures. Painfully honest, incisively reasoned, incredibly rich, almost no one who teaches can read this book and not be changed by Palmer's sheer humanity. Now the center-piece of an initiative by the Fetzer Institute of Michigan, Palmer has become a principal figure in the drive to humanize, personalize and energize America's teaching corps.

Pink, Daniel. *A Whole New Mind*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005.

A bombshell big-concept book whose thesis is that the old information economy is in eclipse, and that what will replace it is much more favorable to the right brain attributes of collaboration, harmony, aesthetics and personal

fulfillment. Anecdotal but nonetheless compelling, Pink, who accurately predicted the rise of independent contracting over the last 15 years in his book *Free Agent Nation*, produces a visionary scenario which has an infinity of implications for how we educate young people.

Remen, Rachel Naomi. *Kitchen Table Wisdom*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.

Remen, a physician, counselor and educator, offers a pioneering glimpse into the emerging field of end-of-life care. By producing brief but touching portraits about the people she has worked with, Remen points the way to an ethic of caring and wholeness in handling death and disease. Overcoming a near-fatal illness herself at a young age, her unique perspective is helping to reshape a profession that is often cold and unfeeling, and has unlimited potential for helping educators face a similar challenge in working with young people.