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BRIERLEY LECTURE ON COLLEGE TEACHING

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"Guides, Curmudgeons, and Lecturers"

I want to thank the University for honoring me with the Jean Brierley Award for 1996. I also want to thank Lee Seidel, the director of the Teaching Excellence Program, for organizing this event. My gratitude extends to my students for allowing me to experiment upon them and thus improve my craft. I also thank the students and faculty who served on the nominating and selection committees. I want to thank my four daughters for being my teachers by allowing me to be a part of their lives. I especially want to thank my wife Beatrice who in one way or another has been with me for 40 of my 57 years. She has been one of my finest teachers as we have attempted to walk the middle path.

This presentation is the Brierley Lecture on college teaching. There are aspects of what I am about to say that are transferable to other school environments, however the analogy may not be complete. I am convinced that the best teaching in the world occurs at the elementary school level. During a recent visit to my grandson's classroom, with twenty first graders milling around, I was given the opportunity to witness such teaching, and it was marvelous to watch. It appeared to me that these young students were learning what all of us must learn; to move beyond our present conceptualizations, to persevere, and to gain a sense of the genuine joy of accomplishment.

There are methods to be learned from courses in pedagogy and these techniques will increase teaching effectiveness. It also goes without saying that teaching effectiveness depends upon the teachers knowledge of the subject matter. However, it is also understood that knowledge of methodology and subject matter do not directly translate into teaching effectiveness. The reason is that

teaching is both an art and a science, and knowing and practicing the science is merely a prerequisite for performing and living the art.

On a recent trip to Mexico my wife and I visited a friend's art studio. After retiring from a long career in architecture he had become very accomplished and well known as a fine artist specializing in water colors. My wife, also an artist, commented to him that his free, loose style bore no resemblance to his architectural training. He proudly indicated that it had taken him a number of years and hard work to free himself from that structure. He appeared pleased that someone would be aware of that difficulty. He then told us he remembered experiencing a point in time while working on a painting when he said to himself, "I think I've got it." I asked him if he could tell us what he meant when he said "I've got it." He thought for a moment and said, "no I can't." Whether he could define it or not, all three of us appeared to know what he was talking about, they from the perspective of the artist and I from being a teacher. By way of explanation we might consider words attributed to the Chinese sage Chuang Tzu: "Words exist because of the meaning, once you've got the meaning you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten the words so I can have a word with him?"

Our knowledge and our approaches to teaching get filtered through "who" we are. This was eloquently stated by Earl Pullias (1963) when he commented that, "The self of the teacher is a sort of prism which breaks up the 'light' that is being considered and casts it into fresh relations, and hence gives it varying color" (p.43). Therefore, teaching effectiveness is related to this elusive integration and also related to what my artist friend experienced when he said "I've got it."

As I prepared for this presentation I realized that I was faced with at least two issues: The first stems from the fact that most people think they are good teachers. I would refer you to a study by K.P. Cross (1977) in which teachers were asked to rate themselves and "...an amazing 94% rate themselves as above average teachers, and 68 percent rank themselves in the top quarter in teaching performance..." (p.10). The second issue that occurred to me was that I was going to attempt to talk about something that is difficult to put into words. So on the one hand I may be pouring tea into cups that are already full, and on the other I can't even talk about it! Nevertheless, I decided to wander and wonder about what recommendations I could make. I would like to share the results of these wanderings and wonderings with you. As personalized as parts of this presentation may be, I believe that there are a number of generalizable elements.

Allow me to begin by recommending a three-stage process of self-observation. I will emphasize self-observation because I agree with Steven Cahn (1978) who while introducing his book said, "Reading this book will not turn a poor teacher into a great one. But it will turn an unreflective teacher into a reflective one, and that is the crucial step on the path toward better teaching" (p. xi). Increasing the effectiveness of teachers who already know subject matter and teaching methods must focus on who they are.

First, I recommend that you consider the personal characteristics of at least three individuals from your past who you believe have influenced your approach to teaching.

Secondly, I recommend that you consider what kind of an impact you wish to make upon students above and beyond the transmission of academic knowledge.

Thirdly, as a function of the first two stages, what do you believe is the most important personal characteristic that you will need to develop and exhibit in order to allow others to judge you as being an effective teacher?

I have applied these areas of self-observation to my own personal and professional development. What follows is the result of that introspective endeavor.

People of Influence

Guides

I grew up in a paper mill town along the northern border of Maine. My father was a mill worker and my mother a homemaker. My father was also a registered hunting guide and some of my memorable conversations with him revolved around his guiding experiences and what it would take if I wanted to be "a good man in the woods." I remember him saying that one of the biggest mistakes made by his young guides was to over-guide. This meant always wanting to make things easier, to help clients when they really did not need the help and to get in the way of the client's learning experience. He said that some guides had a need to "show off" how much they knew and sometimes enjoyed making the client feel incompetent. My father ended his formal education with the sixth grade, but his life experiences provided him with the capacity to be insightful. Among those insights was the idea that it was "who" the guide was that led them to misuse the "what" that they knew. That observation, as well as other experiences with him, has influenced my approach to teaching, being a

father, a husband, a friend, and undoubtedly influenced my approach to my Self.

From the valleys and high mountains of New Zealand, the American West, and Alaska I have been acquainted with professional outdoor guides and mountaineers. In these sometimes intense, sometimes extremely peaceful experiences, I came to some conclusions about guiding and teaching. I observed that the effective guides were there when I needed them and disappeared when I did not need them. They had an uncanny ability to allow me to stumble, get lost, struggle, and learn. However, I never doubted their genuine concern for my welfare. They had the ability to intervene when needed, perhaps when crossing a crevasse field on a glacier, at some high altitude bivouac, or at some complex river crossing. They were skilled at allowing me to stretch myself, to risk. They were skilled at challenging me, causing me to question myself and my abilities. They knew when to support my efforts and shore up my bruised ego. It became obvious to me that what they were attempting to accomplish in the field and what I was trying to accomplish in my classroom were similar. My self-observations led me to consider other people of influence.

Curmudgeons

There has been an influential curmudgeon in my life. As a matter of fact there probably have been more than one. Am I a curmudgeon? I believe if they would have me as a member I would not decline the invitation. Not long ago someone asked me an interesting question. The question was, "What has receiving a teaching award taught you?" I said, "Well, it has taught me that some people are never going to forgive me for getting it." I think there are times when I flirt with membership in the curmudgeon group. I have come to believe that there is a bit of the curmudgeon in successful teachers. I find it intriguing that people who are seen by others as curmudgeons usually do not view themselves as such. Jon Winokur (1987) said, "anybody who isn't a curmudgeon nowadays simply is not paying attention" (p. 5). Winokur also tells us that curmudgeons have as their targets "pretense, pomposity, conformity, and incompetence" (p.1). You can readily see that teachers with curmudgeon characteristics will tend to unsettle some students. Curmudgeons also seem to have a good sense of humor and thus are able to make their messages more palatable. Curmudgeons walk the line between harmful cynicism and an awareness of the human condition, and it is these very qualities that provide them with the ability to make us look at ourselves and perhaps free us from self-limiting excuses.

Lecturers

The words lecture and lecturer generally carry a pejorative tone, as in "Don't lecture me" or "All he does is lecture." Wilbert McKeachie wrote a book entitled *Teaching Tips* that as of 1994 was in its ninth printing. He makes the following point: "Lectures can build structures and expectations that help students read material in the given subject-matter area more carefully" (p.54). This is a way of looking at lectures that deserves greater emphasis. My sense is that there are at least two ingredients in an effective lecture. One of those ingredients is the clarification of specific areas of the subject matter. The second ingredient is providing a structure that the student may utilize in their movement toward insights and conclusions. The effective lecture provides the student with the shopping cart and sends them off to the grocery store.

It has been my good fortune to be on the receiving end of powerful lectures presented by individuals who exhibited an evolving thoughtfulness. These lecturers encouraged me to pay attention to my own learning and living. At an important juncture in my professional development I was influenced by a series of lectures presented by one individual. His presentations made it very clear that he expected me to accept a great deal of responsibility for my professional and personal development. His message was, "Here is the material that I expect you to learn, this is the manner in which it will be presented to you, and do not expect all this information to make sense on the first go around." In the final analysis his message was "I am just trying to get your attention, the next step is yours."

What became clear to me was that "these people of influence" in my academic life were not overly concerned with whether or not I approved of their chosen teaching methods. They would have greatly enjoyed Flannery O'Connor's (1961) words when she said, "And if the student finds that this is not to his taste, well, that is regrettable, most regrettable. His taste should not be consulted; it is being formed" (p. 140).

It was also clear that they cared about whether or not I took that next step. It was apparent that they measured their success by the number of students who decided that this material was worthwhile looking into. In a paradoxical way, the student validates the lecturer by agreeing to pursue the subject matter. Therefore, I learned early on that I have to be very concerned with the students' perseverance and their confidence in flirting with the margins of a challenging ethos.

It is clear to me that I have been influenced by guides, curmudgeons, and lecturers and that they have contributed to "who" I am. I have also become increasingly convinced that my responsibilities as a teacher go beyond the subject matter.

Influences Beyond the Subject Matter

Students not only learn subject matter in our classes, they also develop impressions about the learning process as applied to themselves. In other words, there are various mental sets, attitudes if you wish, that all of us bring to new learning environments. I believe we have to be as concerned with transfer of attitude as we are with transfer of knowledge. Therefore my responsibility extends to influencing the manner and attitude that will accompany the students as they approach their next learning experience.

There is a concept in Taoist literature referring to "barriers to be surmounted". It is generally described as the "dragon's gate". This is a gate through which we must pass on the way to realizing the possibilities within ourselves. Passage through this gate presents us with challenges and being willing to move ahead. This concept relates to what I have called the need to balance peace and challenge. Too much peace and I will not move through the gate and find my own way. Too much challenge and I will not move through the gate and find my own way. This is the search for the golden mean. This dynamic is sometimes referred to as the difference between "push" motivation originating from inside of us, and "pull" motivation which is primarily a focus on something outside of us.

Most teachers recognize when they are in the presence of an individual who is a self-starter. These students are self-motivated and it would seem that all we have to do is point them in the right direction and get out of the way. There is a distinct pleasure in teaching this student, this performer, and this athlete. There is an observable willingness to strive and accept personal responsibility for becoming better, not because of a grade at the end of the semester but because they will be better for the experience. These are the young athletes who will practice by themselves and not just when they know a parent will be coming home in a few minutes to notice them. They are motivated by internal goals.

It is the quality found in this relatively rare self-motivated person that I hope students get a glimpse of in themselves. This is no mean feat, because when people are faced with a difficult situation the frequent response is finding a way out of it by focusing on external reasons; "It is not my fault," "the book is lousy," "he doesn't explain very well," "she doesn't answer questions clearly,"

or "it's too hard." I would observe that a willingness to assume personal responsibility for one's actions is not found in abundance in contemporary society. When students on their own, or being influenced by a teacher, can see the situation as a challenge to be overcome rather than a threat to be avoided, then they have the opportunity to enjoy some personal responsibility for their own development, and like the children in my grandson's classroom, gain a sense of the genuine joy of accomplishment.

I am referring to the ability to transcend "pull" motivation. I am referring to the ability to transcend reliance on form and not substance. I am referring to the ability to transcend the need to call in the "spin doctors." I believe that this is what the skilled teacher can accomplish. I believe she or he can lead us to listen to ourselves, listen to what we are saying to ourselves, and therefore lead us to the true master within. It is possible that when we are led to encounter, understand, and see beyond the lies that we tell ourselves, we enter the realm of knowledge and have moved beyond merely possessing information.

I found the third stage of my introspection to be the most difficult. I was looking for an individual characteristic that provided a base upon which to build the first two stages.

Personal Characteristics

I have never measured nor attempted to operationally define qualities that people of influence appear to possess. When applied to teaching I note that Kenneth Eble (1983) calls one of these qualities character. He says, "Without character a teacher is more ill equipped than if he or she had not mastered particle physics, Shakespeare's tragedies, or harmony and counterpoint" (p. 18). This element of character appears to revolve around characteristics such as integrity, authenticity, freedom from pretense, genuineness, and sincerity. I have come to the conclusion that it has something to do with what most people call "believability." Webster's alludes to this as an aspect of being credible. He then proceeds to define credible as worthy of belief or trust. I think most people know what they mean when they say that a person is believable. We might struggle when trying to define it, but we know when we experience it. I would suggest that teachers, and perhaps all people in a position of influence, find a time to ask themselves if they are believable, and then be alert for the first response that comes into their consciousness. The message that arrives from this introspection, coupled with the interindividual conversations that may ensue, will have the potential to significantly impact upon your presentation of self.

Conclusions

In conclusion I would say that it was important for me to learn what I did best, what type of learning environment allowed me to be who I was. I have accomplished this with varying degrees of success. I knew that I wanted to promote student self-motivation, raise their curiosity, and encourage them to assume increased responsibility for their education and therefore for their lives. As James Thurber (1956) has written, "All men should strive to learn before they die what they are running from, and to, and why" (p. 174).

I believe that as a teacher I must understand my subject matter, express confidence in student aspirations, and acknowledge their achievements. I remain convinced that an atmosphere can be developed in which students listen to themselves as they listen to the teacher. In this process of listening the student reaches what Stanford Ericksen (1984) calls "the moment of instructional truth." It is that point in time "when the student grasps the meaning of an important idea; all else is means to the end of understanding" (p. 6).

Let me close by saying that I believe that excellent teachers unlock students' potential by challenging them to move beyond their personally construed limits. These may be limits with reference to the specific subject matter as well as limits concerning their potential contribution to the human community. It is impossible to isolate one approach or atmosphere for achieving this objective. Each teacher has to find her or his own way of doing that. I will say that there is one thing of which I am thoroughly convinced. In order to learn and develop beyond our self imposed limits we need to have a playground sense of justice, we have to earn it.

On the other hand - who knows about these things?

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