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AND GLADLY TEACH

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The poet Robert Frost once called teaching a "piecing together." Perhaps this phrase is a good point at which we can begin. Education does not exist for anyone simply as a compilation of single items, isolated facts, unrelated theories. One begins to see some form to his education when he has acquired the ability to "piece together" the facts from his history classes, the theories from his science classes, the logic from his mathematics classes, the philosophies from his humanities classes. This ability to generalize is the highest point in the educative process as outlined by Alfred North Whitehead. You may remember that Whitehead saw learning as going through three stages--romance, precision, and generalization.

The first level is that point at which the student finds his work and his exposure to his subject matter fascinating. There is something to be learned, and it appears that searching for the knowledge there can be a fun experience. It is comparable to the "romantic" ideas of school held by many of the bright-shining-faced first graders on that initial morning's encounter.

The second stage, which Whitehead called "precision," must go beyond the level of fascination to the point of agility in the field. The student knows enough to work certain exercises, to explain certain formulae, to interpret certain passages. He knows enough of a specific body of information to feel comfortable with it.

But the highest mark is yet to be attained. Love of learning is a desirable level, but if the student is stopped at the point of having a love affair with a discipline, he could never truthfully be called an educated man. He is nothing more than a fanatic. To stop at the level of precision would be to have created little more than an academic automaton. But the teacher must urge his students one more step--onto the level of

generalization--that area where the student can take what he first loved and second felt competent to handle in a prescribed framework and draw from all this experience certain generalizations which enable him to adapt to any situation. I used to think that surely I would hurry and enroll in the education course which would tell me all the right answers for every predicament. I must have taken too many math courses earlier in life where I always found the answers in the back of the book.

Even Whitehead with his mathematical background sees that education is not simply knowing the right answers to a situation, but it is being able to draw from the reservoir of one's educational background and then considering the alternatives arrive at a sound judgmental course of behavior.

And so, when Frost called education a "piecing together," he must have meant something similar to all of this. But what has been noted so far in relation to the student and his exposure to learning must first be true for the teacher and his commitment to teaching. Geoffrey Chaucer described his Clerk of Oxenford in the Canterbury Tales by saying, "And gladly would he learn and gladly teach." If we would examine Chaucer's description of this early scholar, we must note a degree of similarity between his attitudes and Whitehead's description of education. For in Chaucer's parallel the gladness with which the Clerk approached his learning and his teaching must roughly parallel the romance stage of learning. Unless the teacher finds in his work some degree of excitement, love, and even romance, he and his students will discover instead dullness, routine, and tiredness. It is not always easy to maintain that sense of gladness, that early stage of romance, but just as a troubled world needs occasionally to return to some of the fancy of childhood, so should a troubled teacher return to some of his initial enthusiasm. Harry Harrison

Kroll, the Tennessee novelist and popular teacher for many years on Tennessee college campuses, once told a student, "I know of few things less inspiring than a tired teacher; teach relaxed; enjoy your work. . . . Once you pass the line into weariness, you lose an essential quality--enthusiasm."

For the level of precision noted by Whitehead, I would suggest the Chaucerian parallel of learning. Each of us entered the profession of education that we might be skilled in our chosen area. We wanted to become masters of words or figures or formulae or facts or skills. We sought the level of precision in some area of work so that we might know that we had mastered something. Like the elementary child who finally learns his multiplication tables through the eights or twelves, we knew something that was exact, precise. We are not yet through with this level, for we are still learning.

But what of our generalization, that area which shows our ability to draw upon all we have learned? I would suggest that this area is marked by Chaucer in praising his Clerk's gladly teaching. It is the teaching that is the generalization, for we teach more than specificity. Our involvement in teaching as a lifetime work is made because we see a general application, a general usefulness, for that acquisition of knowledge to which we committed ourselves long ago. Jacques Barzun says in his book Teacher in America, "...the only thing worth teaching anybody is a principle."

I suppose this speech is stoked with idealism, but I feel our need for idealism. We must consider our own feeling toward education to see how well we are putting together what we are with what we teach with whom we teach. Robert Frost told a group of teachers once that the individual teacher had three duties--(1) to herself, (2) to the books, (3) to the students. Some would probably quarrel with the order

in which Mr. Frost listed those duties, but obviously he meant something of which we are now talking in making that arrangement, for the teacher who finds no delight that affects his own life will have considerable difficulty in converting his students. For this reason Frost lists the duty to the teacher first.

I would like to share something with you that I used several quarters ago when I had a rather small class in English Methods. The students in this class had worked quite hard and performed exceedingly well. Instead of the usual final examination, I wrote to the members of the class the following open letter:

Dear Future Colleague,

I suppose this is a most unusual final examination, for it is going to take the form of an open letter to which I should like your response. In the past several weeks I have felt highly perplexed over my responsibility to you as future teachers. You see, I still am convinced that teachers are made somewhere far outside college classrooms. But for those who earnestly seek to become teachers, the classroom, especially the methods classroom, ought at least not distress and destroy.

There are so many things that I wish I had been able to tell all of you-- how to feel for your students, how to excite them, how to say the right thing at the right time--but I do not know all of those things. You walked into this classroom expecting many different things, but certainly you expected a good number of "how-to's" and I have not delivered.

Some would say that right now you need the most practical of help-- how to give an assignment, how to make out a test, how to present a poem, how to fill out a book order, how to discipline, how to talk with a parent or a group of parents, how to herd a flock of thirty-five kids to the cafeteria, how to make those same thirty-five or others like them wake up on a dreary Monday. But I maintain that more than the solutions to those problems you need your idealism well-stoked so that you find your own answers to those problems as they arise. You cannot walk into your classroom with all the "canned" answers; you will find that your youngsters will ask all the wrong questions. Instead, you must learn to know yourself so that you can present your knowledge of subject matter in a useful and viable manner. A classroom that radiates the personality of concern, empathy, willingness, industry, and joie de vivre will be a fine experience for any student.

Don't be afraid to give your heart to your work. It is your destiny. It will be the only heart some young people will ever have offered to them. Your interest in them will possibly first be suspect, but your persistence will soon make it evident to them that you are not just doing a job. You are living a life.

The ugly days will come--too often sometimes. There will be the rude, disturbing, frightening students, for there is still a rude, disturbing, frightening world. But your ability to make that confrontation ought to be out of hope and not out of fear. If you maintain your own dignity and composure, you can master the situation. The answer to achieving greater respect for the teaching profession in our time is not to be found in legislation, collective bargaining, or demonstrations. That respect will come when once again teachers respect themselves and believe earnestly that they have made a significant step in the direction of driving out of the lives of their students darkness and ignorance.

Most of you will be engaged in your student teaching experience during this next school year. During this time you will begin to pick up the practical aids which will make your days more manageable. But you will also encounter the moments of doubt and depression. During those dark moments, remind yourself of the need for good teachers and ask yourself if you are ready to become a good teacher.

When you are in love with your students and with your work, they too will love. I need not remind you that Chaucer provides the most apt description of a scholar and hence a teacher in his comment on the Clerk of Oxenford: "And gladly would he learn and gladly teach." The word "gladly" says a great deal about the attitude of the teacher toward his discipline, that is, subject matter and toward his charges, that is, students.

Best wishes for your success in this our chosen field.

Now I must grant that what I have called for in this letter is no easy task.

Jacques Barzun says, "Teaching in America is a twenty-four-hour job, twelve months in the year; sabbatical leaves are provided so you can have your coronary thrombosis off the campus." But knowing even this truth, we are assured that such constancy in our own preparation and such involvement in our own work must pay off with the achievement of some of our students. We must seek not perfection, only possibility. And then feel rewarded when some of that possibility becomes reality.

There is a story concerning a father who came home late in the evening tired from his day's work. When he sat down to read his paper, his little son began tugging at his sleeve wanting to play. The father put the boy off. But finally the child's persistence at least won his attention. The father tore from the newspaper a picture of the globe and then tore that picture into several small pieces. Giving the pieces to the little boy, the father suggested that the child put the world back together. He knew that would take the child some time. But in just a few minutes, the child was back with the announcement that he was through with his task. Amazed at the speed, the father looked at the map and discovered it rearranged correctly. When he asked the small boy how he had accomplished it so quickly, the child replied, "Well, I didn't know anything about how the world looked, but there was a picture of a man on the back, and I know what a man looks like. When I got the man put together, the world turned out all right."

In an age that cries so beseechingly for someone to put the world back together, it is time for us to stop playing Humpty Dumpty and gladly become scholars of the greatest subject matter known to mankind, what Bacon called the "discipline of humanity."

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