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Thoughts From a Think House: Reflections on Teaching

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In his brilliant book, *Crossing to Safety*, Wallace Stegner explores the power of relationships and friendship to bind people together. Stegner mentions in passing something many academics would make a Faustian bargain for: a “think house.” In the New England of the 1930s Think Houses were cabins or shacks where academics went in the summer to ponder and write. Away from their academic environment and free of distractions they could devote their full attention to thorny problems and gracious writing. The Think House was the equivalent of a hidden faculty cubby, with no name on the door. An unnoticed, anonymous hideaway where the scholar could indulge in the most dangerous pursuit of all: thinking.

Philosophers claim that the highest contemplation is thinking about thinking, though many of them end up sounding a bit like Donald Rumsfeld on one of his rants about “knowing what we know, knowing what we don’t know” and so on. I am of the opinion that thinking about how we pass on what we know and don’t know is no less challenging and no less noble. My reflections in these remarks are the product of a leisurely and deliberate survey of my own academic career, my acquaintance with professors who were either instinctively or methodically good teachers and a constantly growing appreciation for the forgiveness and correction offered by students who are seriously interested in learning.

My conclusions have accumulated over a long time. They are not the product of the need to give this talk (though it provided a passable excuse for finally trying to put

my thoughts in order). More than anything, I found myself at this point in my career, still needing to make sense for myself of what the core of good teaching is.

Or so I thought. The deeper I got into the subject, the more evident it became that “good teaching” is a construct built on a series of understandings and appreciations. Not every good teacher does the same things, and not every one has the same insights.

Stegner’s central themes carry great weight for someone at my stage of life. How do we sustain our relationships with others? How do we make our lives meaningful? How do we cope with loss? In many ways, the professoriate tempts us to divorce ourselves from the world. We are taught to be objective and dispassionate. We are urged to maintain a scholarly demeanor, to maintain dignitas, to set aside personal preferences. If we wish to teach well, we must be reminded of – and remind ourselves of – our humanity . . . and the humanity of those who come to us for understanding.

We do not teach subject matter, we teach students. If most of us are honest we love psychology but probably do not appreciate deeply enough the people whose ideas we teach or the students whose lives we touch. This talk is not about assessment and the formal facts, theories and “things” that students learn. I want to talk today about the essentials, about things more ethereal and, I believe, more important.

Oh, when we talk of “good teaching” we may hide behind questions of timing, technique and tips (strange that I who edited a column on teaching tips for so long would seek that which lies beneath, around and above them). Of course I am attempting to make sense of and validate my career, my life, my calling, my passions, and to justify or at the least make known my values. They may be true, partially true, maybe even a little bit true. Regardless, I want to talk today about the importance of the teacher and what good

teachers do and know. When all is said and done, what teachers bring to their students is themselves. In glorious nakedness and vulnerability, teachers listen, question, admit their ignorance, and in doing so teach, ideally, not just course content but how to conduct oneself with dignity and grace. Good teaching begins when teachers cease hiding behind content and technology.

To do so teachers must be grounded, be real, and know themselves. That is the first Commandment of good teaching. And the one most often ignored.

The act of teaching has meaning because it reflects our highest human aspirations: to explain what life is about, to build ties with others and to end up knowing we have made a difference. There is no greater pain than to know we have taught badly. There is no greater reward than to teach well.

Teaching is Giving

The cliché would have it that “teaching is a gift.” True: some are “natural teachers,” but these folks are phenomena like comets or tornadoes. I have known a few. One, an individual who was physically unattractive almost to the point of disability, who had no discernable social graces, who could barely assemble a coherent sentence or maintain a conversation, would step into the classroom, somehow illuminate it, become witty and articulate, fire his students with passion and appreciation. Colleagues would lurk outside the door of his classroom, trying to recognize this creature, this Quasimodo who had torn the disfigurement from his soul, this Cyrano whose nose was no impediment to the overflow of his great heart.

But in another sense, teaching is a gift: it involves our trustfully giving ourselves and our ideas to others. Teaching is an activity that goes against our impulses: we must

make ourselves transparent and thus vulnerable because in doing so we can lift other people up. As teachers, we model what it means to be a student, what it took to form our values and ideals, what it cost to come to terms with the world.

We have to give students everything —knowledge, a way of life, a way of looking at the world, who we are, our availability -- so that students can project onto us what they need to. We must prove that we are to be trusted. We must establish rapport and court affection. Above all, we must be open to students' concerns and who they are. True teachers cheer, lead, urge, cajole, validate, chide, and reward students. For some students this may be the first encouragement and support they have received in their education and lives.

Good teachers know their world: the wider community, their institution, their students, their subject and their limitations. They enter into teaching seeking to appreciate the complexity and variety of the universe, not to lament it. They carry to their students a vision of reality that is rich, challenging and full of nuance. They know they cannot easily change what is, but they can make small worlds where integrity, honest discussion, and decency are the norm. No matter how ordinary one's institution or students, extraordinary things can happen. Great teachers strive to make this happen. And sometimes it does.

Teaching has nothing to do with what the Maoists used to call “the cult of personality.” There is an old story about a professor whose uncle was electrocuted in Reno for having murdered the local barber. In the obituary he had published, he noted that “At the time of his death, George occupied the chair of applied electricity at a major Western institution.” Self-aggrandizement is not what teaching is about. We cannot model perfection. Our role is not to make ourselves look good.

In the final analysis, teaching is as much a compulsion as it is a choice. . . or at least it should be. We give the gift because we want to. If we don't want to, we are bound to fail.

Teaching is Faith

Faith has been notoriously defined as a “substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.” (Hebrews 11(1)). The most frustrating part of teaching is that there is a pitiful lack of concrete evidence of day-to-day results. All of us have left the classroom full of questions. Did I do it right? Did I make an impact? Did my teaching make any difference at all? Could anyone have taught these students on this particular day?

Good teachers are able (of course they have little choice) to live with that ambiguity. The paradoxical element in teaching is that we have to attend to what we do today, but today or this week or even this one semester may be too limited a time to know if we are making a difference. We live constantly between faith in what we do and doubt that it means very much.

Good teachers have to be resilient, for success and certainty never last for very long. On rare occasion, a report wafts back to us that something we did in the classroom actually was right. An alum sends a note saying you were a good teacher. A student stops after class to pursue a point you made or (better yet) to argue it. Little enough food to sustain a career of preparation and trying. What we have to count on is a hope in the unseen thing: that students leave our classroom having been challenged, having grown, knowing that our passion for the discipline is real and even understandable.

Friendship

In grade school, I was taught the difference between the two spellings of principle by being given the mnemonic, “the principal is your PAL.” Of course, even then, none of us believed the principal was really our pal. If we were called to his office, it was not to share stories or jokes or lunch. We would no more call the principal by his first name (or worse yet, what all the students called him) than we would do so with our parents.

So when I say “teaching is friendship,” I do not mean the sort of thing that misled, neophyte teachers sometimes try: pretending to be as sophomoric as their students, going out and drinking beer with the seniors after a night class, adopting trendy clothes and phraseology. Teachers must be willing, within the ethical and real boundaries of being a teacher, of offering and receiving friendship from their students.

Inevitably, the friendship that develops is tinged with the realization that it will end with a loss. Students usually leave us much sooner than friends in our personal lives. After a few years of undergraduate schooling students move on in their lives, as they should, what one colleague calls the poignancy of teaching.

I offer, however, that if we are open to being students’ friends—a cup of coffee, a nonjudgmental listening to problems, an interest in their lives, decisions, and successes, an openness to their touching our own lives in some way—we have the opportunity to influence them and to make some small part of their education memorable and meaningful for them. Joni Mitchell sang, “Love is touching souls.” I wonder if teaching is not the same. I believe we too readily discount the importance of friendship with students as a teaching tool.

The basis for this friendship may be a shared affinity for ideas, a growing acquaintance across several courses, our esteem for their struggles and determination,

simple good will, a regard and respect for their goals and being, a liking for their youth and their energy.

Friendship means that we must be involved in the students' worlds, attending their athletic, cultural and other events. It demands simple courtesies, answering thoughtful questions thoughtfully, replying to their email, being solicitous when they look ill or more fatigued than usual. The power of a few moments with a student with direct eye contact and an interest in them enriches both of us.

Friendship I believe comes from acknowledging that students are people who fill our lives (and even make it possible: without students, exactly what would we do?). Students who attend our classes, do what we ask them to, and grow and mature under our tutelage, keep us vital, if not young. If we hide behind our syllabi, exams, and requests for portfolios and outcome measures, we miss the opportunity to be a part of our students' lives. There must be more to teaching than that. No need to be the pal the principal allegedly was. But there is a great need to be a friend to those who look to us for education and help.

Students are Students

I had a colleague (OK, let's be honest; more than one) who was fond of saying, "This would be a great profession if it weren't for the students." The PhD seems to carry with it instant fogginess: students are shallow, trivial, irresponsible.

We need to enjoy the humanity and foibles of students. Yes, they do make unreasonable demands (the most lucid analysis is often followed by a plaintive "is that going to be on the test?"). At times, their inability to understand is almost demonic. They drop the chain of reasoning with a resounding and indifferent clang!

When they (the fogeys) were students, they were never that way. They never daydreamed in undergraduate class or skipped a lecture to play Frisbee or found a desperate reason for not having an assignment done (all of those dogs who ate term papers).

Good teaching requires that we acknowledge that students are students. It makes it much easier to relate to them and teach well. We need to accept and empathize with them because – and I mean this sincerely – it is hard to be a student. Admittedly, it is also hard to be a professor, maybe even to be an administrator (though I somehow doubt that) or a cook, a ditch digger or anything else that requires commitment. But most students have never been led down the path to “student hood” before they step through the gates of our universities. The sorts of intellectual discipline we demand of them are far from what they encountered. How often have you had a student say, after receiving a bad grade on a paper, “But I spent so much time and effort on it; doesn’t that count?” Ah, what a lovely, naïve vision of the real world. Trying is all it takes. Outcomes aren’t that important.

To put things into some sort of perspective, remember we and our students are the core elements in the fellowship of higher education, they with their roles and we with ours. When teachers disrespect students they lose sight of who they are and what they might become. Only when teachers respect students can they be transformed into scholars. True, some students are in college at the wrong time in their lives and for the wrong reasons. That should not stop us from working with even them, hoping that a cataclysmic change will take place.

A single great teacher can make that happen. I have a friend whose son entered college on the basis of innate talent, never having had to study very hard. The youngster seemed to be majoring mostly in beer until his third semester, when the dean of students who taught a required introduction to the humanities, handed back a paper with a curt “see me” at the bottom and simply said, “Mark, you now have a choice. You can become a student or you can maybe drift through four years here and then wander through the rest of your life.” He became a student and went on to receive a graduate degree from Harvard. No, it doesn’t happen often but there is hope. And a friendly concern worked in this case.

Another young man entered college because he needed a bachelor’s degree to be employed by major airlines; his passion was flying. He graduated in 3 ½ years with a mediocre college record. Yet many of his teachers treated him with respect and worked with him. To this day, 7 years since graduating, he has kept his philosophy books (his major) and still enjoys reading and discussing modern physics (it fascinates him). Something went right; his love of certain disciplines and ideas was nurtured not extinguished. And yes, he now flies jets for a living. This student is my elder son.

When students do badly, the default assumption is always that we teachers are doing something wrong and must approach students differently. That is not necessarily true. But good teachers approach students with optimism that they will succeed knowing full well that part of teaching is omnipresent failure. You don’t fight with students. You seduce, cajole, reinforce, and cheer lead. When we listen, a student may be connected to at least one teacher, and this relationship may provide a sense of meaning and

connectedness that their peers do not experience or benefit from. Teachers should expect to put forth great effort to help students become educated.

We embrace and accept our students for who they are and where they are intellectually when we meet them and acknowledge their realities. Teachers must always remember, respect and empathize with the role and difficulties of being a student and of learning. Good teachers are not surprised or dismayed when students act like students.

Patience

We live in a world preoccupied with results. And much of our training reinforces discerning and assessing cause and effect relationships. Would that teaching bore to learning what stimulus does to response. Ring a bell and the dog salivates. But teaching the dog to connect the sound with the appearance of food takes much longer.

Impatience is the enemy of the teacher. We are inclined to be over-anxious as to whether our students are learning. As psychologists, we should realize that movement from one stage to another is likely to be incremental. How rarely any of us is thunderstruck. How rarely we have cause to shout Eureka! So we must be patient with our students. They will learn in their own sweet time.

I wonder, however, if patience with ourselves is not even more important. Courses come packaged with so much material that our syllabi are usually selective. And as we progress in our scholarship we become ever more aware of how sophisticated and complex once seemingly simple issues are. A colleague in English came to me one day, stunned that he had spent one whole class period explicating a single line of a poem. "At this rate, I'll not get past the first year of the seventy-year period the course is supposed to cover," he complained, "What did the students think of such a close reading?" I asked.

“Oh, I suppose they thought it was too, too much,” he sighed. “But it really told them what they needed to know about the art.”

Isn't doing what we are supposed to do enough? As teachers, we merely crack open the door to discovery. In time, some of the students will push it open for themselves. And that is the operative phrase: “with time.” As worldly academics, we know you cannot make good Scotch in a day. It takes longer than that to make good students, too.

A Quiet Life

Teaching can be a quiet life. Were it not for the constant bureaucratic requirements, I would even be willing to use the cliché, “a life of the mind.”

Some days, a conversation with a colleague, the reading of a journal, or the chance to evaluate a new text provides the most pleasure we experience. Ours should be mostly a world of ideas and of people, and both can be exhausting. The energy and emotion it takes to teach well is poorly understood, if at all, by those who do not practice the art.

Quiet and peace with ourselves lie at the heart of effective teaching, for we deeply need time to think about what we do and what we know. It is easy to be diverted from the path of teaching. Many the professor whose life is committee meetings and paperwork. Many the classroom performer who spends valuable hours composing snazzy Power Point lectures or polishing her Internet site. For fear of belaboring the obvious, teaching demands moments of contemplation, times of loneliness, periods in a Think House.

Until we give that gift to ourselves, we have no gifts to give others.

The Power of Words

In the film and novel, *Dreamspeaker*, an 11-year-old named Peter is both profoundly disturbed and aggressively antisocial. A shaman, the *Dreamspeaker*, begins to heal Peter by teaching him to label and understand what he is experiencing. The words come from Native American world views, not those which under gird Western culture and values. The *Dreamspeaker* shows us the power of words in understanding what we experience in our lives and that our words provide our students with our view and understanding of the world

I am no Biblical scholar, but I do know the views of those who have spent their lives studying scripture. Its most potent ideas center about a simple thing: words. “In the beginning was the word.” “And God had Adam name each of the animals.” “The Word was made flesh.” The ancient Greeks used to call poets vates, creators, for they made worlds from words. Words are tools, but as sharp edged as a carpenter’s chisel and as specialized as a router bit. Much of what we do in the classroom involves teaching students about the words that mediate between ideas and accomplishment, that focus our thinking, that grant or deny us the ability to deal with the world in which we live. Those of us who teach must be aware of – and beware of – the power of words.

There are two lessons all teachers must carry in their hip pockets. First, the language we teach in the classroom does not merely describe psychology: it is psychology. Precise use of terminology is critical to our efficacy as professionals. That is always the problem with Pop Psychology: a few compelling terms get pasted onto every situation. The long hood on his Mustang suggests he has penis envy. Her love for her father is Oedipal, or more accurately “Electral.” We need to demonstrate and reinforce

the reality that the words used in dealing with other humans and their critical interests must be precise, honest and reflective of reality.

Second, words are a means to affirming the worth of a person. When our students choose to reach out to or connect with us, the words we use must resonate and connect with them, just as the Dream Speaker's words resonated with Peter. Like the Dreamspeaker, we can help students create a world that is coherent, challenging and filled with meaning.

Every good teacher needs a stock of words, especially supportive words, kind words, proud words, and acknowledging words. Students hunger for acknowledgment and – like us – meaning. One of the delights and rewards of our profession is that it is within our power to build a vision and to affirm other people. We can only do so, however, if we are willing to use our words, for only then do we have a chance to make students' educations more meaningful and satisfying.

A Sense of Awe

There is something essentially childish about good teachers. The world has not stolen their sense of wonder. Time has not eroded their delight in simple things. Their Think House is not only a home to great and lofty ideas, it is also a playhouse where the ridiculous cannot only be considered but can lead to new ways of understanding. I think, for example, of String Theory – and, no, I am not going to talk about quantum and modern physics; an analogy to the simplest thing, a cat's cradle, has helped us understand some of the most complicated and intellectually challenging aspects of our universe – uncertainty, simultaneity and layered realities.

What we try to do in the classroom is transmit our own sense of awe. The very fact that we have been handed this opportunity to share our understanding, that we have in our hands the power of knowledge and reflection, that someone has lent us the hopes and dreams of these students for a brief period of time is an immeasurable boon, and should inspire awe in its own right.

Teaching as the Sacred

In the 19th century – a time when advanced education was much less common and learning was held in some regard – it was not unusual to find the professoriate labeled priesthood. It is not hard to see why. Like the ancient priests, professors cherished and preserved the ancient knowledge. Matriculation and graduation were then (and are mostly now) rites. “The Professor” might play a piano in a whorehouse, but he (then Professors were always he) was above and apart from the general run of louts.

I suppose to some extent, when I say teaching is a sacred act, some of those notions lie behind my assertion. We are still the ones who preserve knowledge. We are still the ones who are seeking to understand the universe and its inhabitants. We still claim to pursue Truth, apart from equivocation, the demands of expediency and the desire to spin reality into something that benefits us.

But good teaching is a sacramental act in yet another sense: it is our opportunity to share what is at the core of our discipline with others, to transmit our faith in the efficacy of the mind and pure intentions to deal with difficult problems. To explain them if not to solve them. Teachers seek to convert their students into scholars (the fact that we so rarely succeed may actually explain why there aren't more professors cluttering up the world).

And because teaching is the exercise of a very important duty (if you can't stomach the word sacred), the act itself must be infused with respect and dignity. There is a mighty impulse to trivialize both the act of teaching and the content of most disciplines. There is a sort of basic dilution of standards – which I will comment on in just a moment -- that goes beyond the whine about “dumbing down” psychology or geometry or art history. The theory seems to be that to make knowledge accessible, it must be simple and easy to swallow. No hard truths to break our teeth. No upsetting ideas to impede our digestion. No harsh criticisms to make the dish too hot.

For many hundreds or thousands of years, our disciplines have struggled to pare away the untruths, have sought to save the hard facts, have fought to bare the truth, have affirmed the value of pure thought. They have earned their dignity. As teachers, we are obliged to carry it forward and to keep it alive.

That is the trust we have been handed. Teaching our subject well is what we must strive to do.

Illegitimi Non Carborundum Est

I have spent some time so far painting a rather lovely portrait of our profession as teachers. Now is the time to step back . . . and look at the mess on the floor. Like any other vocation, teaching attracts its share of dolts, timeservers, slackers, whiners, martinets, sea-lawyers, aspiring overseers, snobs, snots and geeks.

Good teaching demands sturdiness and purpose and even a kind of situational blindness. I have talked about faculty who are grounded as teachers, who carry a sense of worth, dignity, and grace wherever they go, and bring these qualities to whatever they do.

They know also that teaching for a lifetime is a long, slow flow of semesters and years. This is a lesson we all need to learn.

Ah, but what do we do about the latest idiocy? We are going through long-range planning for the fourth time in five years. The programs on our computers are being standardized to incorporate the software of the low bidder. I keep getting notes reminding me to take home my leftovers in the department fridge because throwing them in the trash draws critters, is ecologically outré, and encourages identity theft (apparently my true self is one-half a stale baloney sandwich).

The first thing we must do is to understand that idiocy is as endemic to organizations as ants are to picnics. The second is to realize that idiocy is irrelevant to what we really do for a living. The third is to identify, to taxonomize, and to subvert it whenever it raises its shaggy head. And the fourth is to cherish that old piece of pidgin Latin that counsels *illegitimi non carborundum est*: Don't let the bastards wear you down.

I have written elsewhere about how to live a happier, more productive academic life. There are ways to cope. But the key I believe is the decision to cope. One must first decide that teaching is so important it will not be offset by idiocy. We must be proud of our teaching, keep it in a safe place. Just as some people with horrid diseases are taught to use imagery to create and go to a safe place in their heads, so must teachers. We need to decide that teaching is the most important thing we do. Then all those aberrations which make the academy such a fertile source for book and movie plots can arise, while we stand aside and watch the parade of clowns march by.

Being Opens to Inner Experience and Living in the Moment

The very title of this section justifies my starting with a quotation from Lao Tzu¹.
Teachers know the following.

“Sometimes things are ahead and sometimes they are behind;
Sometimes breathing is hard, sometimes it comes easily;
Sometimes there is strength and sometimes weakness;
Sometimes one is up and sometimes down.”

I have always thought the difficulty in reading Eastern philosophy lies in the fact that the subject is never approached directly. A Western philosopher will write something simple: “do we receive our knowledge of the world through our senses, or is it born with us?” But one from the East will simply say, “The lotus blooms in the soil of our memories.” I will try to avoid obscurity here. But be forgiving. Be gentle.

When I say, “be open to inner experience,” I am saying “do not strip the intellectual skeleton of psychology of the flesh of emotion.” Let your students see and appreciate that ours is a human science, not only in its subjects but also more importantly in its motivation and goals. Freud and Skinner were marvelous “psychologists” but they also were human beings. Even those who study maze behavior do not do so because they enjoy baffling rats; they have a greater and higher purpose.

As teachers, we sometimes forget that our insights and knowledge did not come to us just from books and lectures and experiments. The things we understand most thoroughly have become incorporated into our very being. Ideally, we do not just

¹ (Lao Tzu. (1972). *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English. New York: Vintage Books, No. 29.

“practice” psychology the way a mechanic practices brake repair. We are psychologists, people with a certain belief system, a certain compulsion to take on problems; a certain need to help others. Our learning and experiences have infected us. Our role as teachers gives us an opportunity to pass on that infection.

As for “living in the moment,” I can only say the obvious . . . or perhaps what Lao Tzu meant: On any given day, we are very different teachers. Our intellectual and emotional state flavors what we are able communicate about our subject. Lao Tzu might have said, “Sometimes there is growth, sometimes there is shrinking,” for every good teacher knows when she is “on” and when she is not. To be a good teacher, you must be reflective. You need peace. You need to withdraw to your Think House and recharge your mind. And you must be aware of precisely where you are at the moment; entering into a dialogue with students constantly aware that in some sense you are impaired. Like an athlete beginning to tire, the good teacher knows how to compensate, how to play with pain and fatigue, how to work around the disability just for this class, just for this flickering moment. That is something all of us need to learn. That is something most of us do learn, imperfectly perhaps but necessarily.

Pride in Teaching

Of course I am proud to be a teacher. Of course I am proud to be a psychologist. I refer to pride as a motivator and a consolation.

Why do we try to be not just professors of psychology but also good professors?

I think the answer to that question is implied again and again in the remarks I have made getting to this point. We have chosen teaching as a calling, as a vocation and not just something we do to justify a paycheck. Students (and, if it is not too old

fashioned, their parents) give us attention and credence and forgiveness and their enormous potential to outstrip us. Our disciplines (both psychology and teaching) are built on the highest of all motivations – giving to and helping others. We work to be good professors for every one of those reasons.

And when the parade of clowns I mentioned before marches by yet once again, our pride in doing the right things in the classroom, our commitment to a discipline that is at once art and science, our faith that thought not only takes precedence to action but assures that actions will be for the good of others . . . all of them let us shake our heads, chuckle resignedly and go back to doing what is important: bringing students along.

Like Sisyphus, we push the rock up the hill, again and again and again—for a lifetime. But this is not a punishment. As Sheldon Kopp, the humanistic psychotherapist and author, contends: like Sisyphus, we are satisfied, we are sustained by the activity and we teach and then teach again. Albert Camus wrote of Sisyphus, “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.” Teachers teach. The very act defines us.

Our full involvement in our chosen vocations is what lends us humanity. Recognizing and acting on that realization gives us the pride needed to go into the classroom year after year and do our best.

Conclusion

As I sat in my Think House and put together these little essays about what I have learned from teaching, I wondered how to end my remarks. Oh, there are many things I could have done. Listed the lessons learned. Tried to compose some striking coda at the

end of which the fat lady finally stopped singing. The problem is, once you start thinking deeply about teaching, there is no end.

When we verbalize what is meant by the word teaching, it sounds easy: teaching is the act of taking what we know and how we know it and transplanting both into another person. Anyone who has stood in front of a class understands that there are a thousand barriers between that ideal and its accomplishment. A janitor vacuuming outside the door. A car that didn't start this morning. A sophomore noisily snoozing in the front row. A massive set of term papers waiting to be graded.

But these barriers are mere distractions. We cannot lose sight of the fact that teaching is most fundamentally a transaction between two people. Note that I do not say "between a professor and a student;" that implies a baneful hierarchy.

The point is this: teaching is not tricks. Great teachers don't turn lead to gold or do voices or wear silly costumes. They challenge other human beings to consider ordinary things in extraordinary ways. Set aside the distractions and enjoy students as people. Lead them down a straight path, but comment on the sights that lie beside the road. Follow simplicity but never let them forget that complexity lies all around.

What does it mean to teach? For one thing, in its particulars it means something different to every one of us in this room. I went back to my calendar for a full academic year and listed all the activities either imposed on me or that I volunteered for. The list filled seven pages (see Appendix A), from advising to writing letters of reference for students. Amazingly, not many of these tasks and chores were visible to students or had anything directly to do with the act of teaching.

Which brings me back to the point I made at the beginning: all of us need a hideaway where we can think about our vocation. There are far too many diversions out there that tempt us to live the unexamined life, the one Socrates said was not worth living.

And so when the semester or academic year or a career has ended, we ask if our lives counted for something. Were we faithful to what was expected of us? Did we learn from it?

Good teachers are not afraid to let the act of teaching touch them. Good teachers focus on their teaching and their students. The rest is overhead.

In the final analysis, teachers teach. And good teachers teach well because they have thought deeply about what they do and why they do it, about their students, and about their commitment.

They are not afraid to go into the Think House and confront themselves. Or to learn from their thoughts. With joy.

¹ I thank Tom Herzing, a dear friend and colleague, for his ideas and support.

Appendix A

The Things that Teachers Do

I have been thinking about what it is that teachers do. I looked at my schedule books for an academic year; I have all 32 of mine, material for the arcane archives of the obscure. I was interested to note that almost everything a teacher does is not scheduled. Oh, there are classes to meet, office hours to hold, exams to pick up once scored, time set aside for reading papers, and the like. If only graduate students and prospective faculty knew the truth about what it is that teachers do. What is so critical about what it is we do is that “we are what we do. What we do defines our very existence. Teachers

Advise

Book shop

Choose endlessly (texts, videos, lecture material, exam items, and the like)

Debate with colleagues and students

Emote

Check email

Wordsmith

Listen

Question

Understand

Understand Deeply

Make mistakes

Make more mistakes

Google

Preview videos

Obsess

Keep in touch with students

Profess

Lead discussions

Clean out file drawers

Meet with students

Meet with colleagues

Attend meetings

Attend more meetings

Write policy

Write exams

Write letters of recommendation

Write lectures

Write scholarly works

Serve on thesis or dissertation committees

Serve on departmental, college or institutional committees

Serve coffee and tea to guests and students

Clean our offices

Wonder how our offices get so messy in the first place

Read the student newspaper

Advise students with problems

Advise students on graduate school

Advise students on life

Live a life, if we can

Change bulbs in the overhead projector

Clean chalk off our clothes

Clean whiteboards

Lose our voices

Wing it when the computer for PowerPoint does not work

Wing it when we are so tired of what we planned for class that day we cannot stand it

Listen to colleague appeals on tenure, renewal or promotion

Write departmental policies

Cook a dish for the departmental picnic

See physicians after tearing up our bodies at student softball, volley. and other games.

Mourn the passing of time as colleagues once beloved retire or pass away

As we age, go from being the students' friends, to their parent, to their grandparent

Wonder how it is possible that the son or daughter of someone we once taught is enrolled
in one of our classes

Listen to students plead for a higher grade

Listen to students plead to get into one of our classes

Wonder why our exams cause so many students' grandparents to become ill

Wonder at the sense of entitlement some of our students display

Wonder at the courage and persistence some of our students display

Crawl out of work so tired we do not know even who we are

Wonder at how many cups of coffee we have drunk at meetings so boring we could
scream

Serve on recruitment committees

Be understanding and nice when we really would rather not be so

Manage our anxiety and worries about tenure, promotion, or the use of our time

Exalt in the flexibility our jobs sometimes give us

Prepare our courses

Revise our courses

Get our act together

Get our act together again

Wonder what it would be like to do something else for a living, anything else

Tell others ours is the best job in the world

Hear on occasion that we have made a difference in a student's life

Share the successes of others in which we had some small part

Allow our students to dream

Take away students' dreams

Worry about the quality of our advice to students

Wonder what we know, anyways

Feel like an imposter, can't anyone do what we do?

Say yes

Say no

Wonder why the football coach is the highest paid person on campus

Revel in not being an administrator

Wonder if we would make a good administrator

Climb intellectual mountains

Realize there is always a higher mountain

Exalt in publications, an edited book chapter and the like

Decide that editing books takes time away from original work

Do collaborative work with students

Wonder why the able student comes along so seldom

Straighten chairs in our classroom

Leave notes for colleagues to leave a clean classroom for others

Wonder how a text author can revise a book every 18 months

Search for the perfect text

Think of writing that text

Regain our sanity, at least for the moment

Feel good when we hear that students like our classes

Work through the devastation when some students do not like our classes

Realize that the beginning of fall semester is our true New Year's Day

Wonder what we could have done with our intelligence, drive and hard work in another profession

Wonder how many other jobs ask employees to pay for their own parking

Realize that our professional lives would be hell if a handful of people left campus

Wonder how many more tasks people expect us to do

Feel as if we make a difference

Wonder why for so many politicians we are a necessary evil

Teach

Teach more

Teach even more

Love our teaching schedule

Change our teaching schedule

Look forward to the end of the academic year

Realize that by looking forward to the academic year, and the next, and the next we are wishing our lives away

Wonder where our optimism and hope spring from each fall as the school year begins

Love computers

Hate computers

Remember the good old days

Realize that the good old days are now

Wonder how much of teaching is a simple act of faith that it is all worthwhile

Obsess about our mistakes with students and in our teaching

Learn to forgive ourselves for these mistakes

Forgive ourselves again and again

Mentor junior colleagues

Watch colleagues leave for other positions

Wonder if the grass really is greener sometimes

Wonder if we are the only teacher who awakes at 2 a.m. obsessing about something that must be taken care of the next day

Take a deep breath and give our next class all that we have

Look at the things we carry. Whiteboard markers, extra batteries for mikes, our own computers, overhead transparencies, lecture notes, student papers, chalk, laser pens, class rosters, course syllabi, and course handouts. These are the fabric of our lives.

Wonder what we will do if the fire alarm goes off or a bomb scare takes place when students are taking an exam

Post exam results

Respond to students' questions about exam results, final grades, extra credit, and anything else we use to decide their grades

Keep our patience

Lose our patience

Know how true it is that youth is wasted on the young

Wonder how it is that this younger generation we are now teaching is going to find their way in society, and make it a better place

Lament. Complain. Become discouraged.

Savor, hope and have faith

Grieve

Regret

Choose

Endure