

## Teaching: A Lifestyle and Dream

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*Teaching is a messy, indeterminate, inscrutable, often intimidating, and highly uncertain task....Exposing one's knowledge, personality, and ego to the regular scrutiny of others in public is not easy work under the best of circumstances.*

-- Richard Elmore [1]

**I**N THE fall of 1993, I was hired to teach exercise physiology at The College of St. Scholastica [2]. Eighteen years I find myself still in Duluth, MN. I am still a teacher, researcher, and writer. Being a teacher is always a work in progress. Contrary to the desire of a few, my teaching remains highly personalized, grounded in the love for teaching and sharing what I know with students. My style is all about my individuality, not conformity. It is about my passion for teaching. Or, as Eva Brann [3] said, "The teacher is a lover-in-chief prepared not only to be observed in the activity of love but to beckon students into it."

*Many students can no longer do it by themselves. Their sense of taking personal responsibility for what they don't know has been repressed. They are struggling for new ideas and new thinking. They hunger and thirst after something better.*

As a professor of exercise physiology, I am guilty of being passionate about teaching. I am committed to teaching, if not possessed by it. Thus, it is easy to write that I live to teach. Unfortunately, there

are college teachers who see teaching as a job. They get little pleasure from teaching their classes. It's just a job! Often, they are insecure and afraid of failure. That's why they read their typed notes and act the part. But teaching is much more than that. Real teachers aren't afraid to walk away from their lecture notes and speak their minds. They understand that failure is a part of the process of negotiating their best thinking.

It is my conviction that students know when college teachers are losers. They may not speak about it with eloquence or passion while held captive in the

*You must love to take responsibility for what you don't know. This is an absolute requirement of our educational system.*

classroom, but more often than not, they remember the hard work, the moving lectures, the challenging ideas, and the worthwhile comments of the passionate teacher. Good teaching cannot be reduced to "just being in front of the class." It is founded in one's identity and integrity. The ego-battered teacher

at the hands of an insensitive student understands that teaching requires exposing the self to myriad forms of criticism.

Day-after-day, teachers with integrity are driven to stay the course. They aren't afraid to take an idea into unknown territory. Teaching is about being perfect. Rather, teaching is taking ideas to the edge of what you know to inform and produce the richest learning experience possible. It is reliving the teaching moments whereby the disinterested student is no longer demoralizing. To stand in front of students who are yawning and unfocused isn't easy. Teachers who devote their lives to teaching aren't happy when students are texting. Surprised, even astonished, at the students' lack of interest and commitment, if not the lack of respect and responsibility to achieve and learn, the teacher's basic instinct is to say, "Please turn off your phones and put them away."

It is then the subtle emotions of silence fill the room as though the teacher has crossed the line. Those moments are always disappointing, and invariably the students who have been texting take it out on the teacher during evaluations at the end of the semester. Usually, administrators and others believe the teacher when

it comes to explaining classroom activities. Sometimes, even when it is obvious, administrators use the course evaluations against teachers. Yet, in the midst of all this they “stay the course.” There’s always a balancing act between restlessness and self-consciousness about teaching that gets under the skin. The passionate teacher wrestles daily with how to help students to take responsibility for their education.

Teaching is not about the money. It is a calling. Common expressions such as “anyone can teach” or “when I retire, I plan to teach” are examples of failure to understand the “calling.” Teachers do not just teach for themselves, and they don’t teach necessarily for students. They teach because they have to. Being a teacher is a state of mind. It is the fix for keeping their sanity. For me, teaching is a wonderful link

between the known and the unknown. I can’t think of a time when one area of study didn’t help me with understanding something else, making it more harmonious and connected. Another great thing about teaching is how it fills you with energy and the need to share your thinking.

Taking the opportunity to teach responsibly and seriously is transformational. Teaching changes the teacher. It changes how the teacher filters, interprets, and relates to information. And behind it all is the courage to think differently and to create. As Rollo May [4] said, “...if you do not express your own original ideas, if you do not listen to your own being, you will have betrayed yourself.” In short, courage is necessary to teaching others how to and why *becoming* themselves is essential commitment in life. It is teaching others and yet knowing at the same time that we might possibly be wrong. It is a mystery indeed, but certainly one born of rebellion and rage against ignorance.

Teaching is therefore the process of bringing something new into being. That is, giving birth to some new thought, idea, or reality. At its core is creativity or as Webster defines it as *the process of making, of brining into being*. In fact, the

*Because I am educated and understand its power, I am of the belief that everyone should be. Even more, being educated, I must identify myself with thinking better, and becoming an extension of the educational system.*

first thing that is noticed about teaching is the moment when the teacher “catches him- or herself sensing something different about an idea or point of view.” It is then he or she becomes absorbed in it, perhaps, for the first time experiencing it from a different angle. It is as the person has entered into the mix of possibilities and yet, not sure of the right encounter. Such sudden ideas often given birth to a fully different perspective; one that requires a different engagement. It can be baffling on one hand while being a vital link of experience on the other.

The absorption, being caught up, and wholly involved in the moment can last a second to hours. There is no specific time constraint that defines the experience of actualizing the encounter of a something with an entirely different form. Rest assured that the *making of an idea* is part of the “lifestyle of a teacher.” This is why the teachers who live to teach feel that there is something in their work that is special and essential to our world. Thus it is understood that the impulse to teach is also an act of creating radical new ideas and new frontiers in thinking while serving others.

In any case, this vision of teaching involves speaking in a voice that is often taken as a threat to the control that is required of others. The result, by the very nature of the two entities, is either the death of creative teaching or an act of increased expression and meaning. The latter is a glimpsed of encountering the excitement of something new. This in itself defines the act of thinking and self-creating. Or, as Rollo May said [4], “It is the capacity to ‘dream dreams and see visions’ to consider diverse possibilities, and to endure the tension involved in holding these possibilities before one’s attention.”

*Everyone who participates in the educational system – and students themselves, first of all – are responsible to mankind as a whole. They have an obligation with respect to the goal of improved education and to the development of the minds of men. We must learn to look far into the distance, far beyond our own immediate and legitimate interests.*

What is crucial to remember and interesting in that it should never be forgotten, especially by those who want to be teachers. According to Richard Elmore [1], “Teaching is a

-- Michel Quoist [5]

messy, indeterminate, inscrutable, often intimidating, and highly uncertain task.” What people fail to get is that teaching requires deep immersion in a subject over a long period of time. Not just anyone is a teacher and, in particular, those who haven’t lived the excitement and the challenge of learning the core subjects of a profession over a lifetime cannot be classified as having lived the lifestyle of a teacher. The ultimate test comes from the shared love of teaching and not from the work itself.

It is no accident that the love of teaching is filled with gracefully distorted moments when normality explodes into craziness. The truth is there is no end to politics and power. Conflicts may never be resolved, but the artful natural expression of shared joy and love for teaching can always continue in one form or another. Or, perhaps, at least so for those who have lived the profound failure of leadership [5]. The soul of a teacher prospers little in an environment that feeds on misinformation and greed. The teacher dies of boredom for lack of teaching. Moreover, it is a great myth of academia to imagine that the teacher’s character and soul can be nourished without a dream.

*Not much happens without a dream. And for something great to happen, there must be a great dream. Behind every great achievement is a dreamer of great dreams. Much more than a dreamer is required to bring in to reality; but the dream must be there first.*

-- Robert Greenleaf  
*Servant Leadership* [7]

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