"My Teachers Rode with Jesse James," or Teaching Is Hard: A Political Scientist's Reflections on Good Teaching

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ABSTRACT This article examines the chief characteristics that make for good or great teaching. A combination of professional, disciplinary, and key interpersonal factors is required to advance from good to great. The alchemic process of learning—especially "how" we learn—also is explored.

Teaching is hard—and with apologies to my School of Education colleagues, great teaching is not the result of well-developed lesson plans. Great teaching is the result of great teachers. I have had a few along the way, and after 39 years of college teaching, I still aspire to one day become a great teacher.

MY JOURNEY

I was not what you would call a model child or a model student. Not even close. I remember sitting upright, always upright, in my little chair at St. James Catholic School in New Jersey, and the nuns—although never using the word "dumb"—made it very clear that "Michael was different." I went through school always hanging on to the bottom end of the bell curve. This, of course, made me very popular—by comparison to me, all the other students seemed so smart. As a child, I was suspected of swimming too long in the shallow end of the gene pool. At the time, an undiagnosed dyslexic condition led others to believe—and I allowed them to convince me—that I was dumb.

I had other interests: first sports, later girls. I got into high school because of sports, got through high school because of sports, got into college because of sports—and then the grade point average hit the fan. At the end of my freshman year, I had "earned" a 1.4 GPA. The paperwork for my expulsion from college was on the desk of the academic vice president, but the baseball coach intervened and saved me from being thrown out of school.

Then I turned it around. But why? How?

I dropped baseball and picked up books. I devoted myself with the same determination and discipline to academics as I had to baseball—and, you know what, it was fun. Mikey liked it!

There was some really good stuff in those books—some really bad stuff too, but it was fun poking holes in that. I was impressed with all of these really smart guys (we did not read books by or about women back then) tackling impossible problems, asking grand and complex questions, trying to make sense of a mixed-up, upside-down world. It was fun and it was challenging.

When I was young(er), however, I harbored no small amount of resentment—even hostility—toward my teachers and school. We always seemed to be headed in different directions. Teachers wanted to train me, stifle me, inhibit me, and impose order and control. Their motto seemed to be: "Stay within the lines, the lines are your friend!"

We did not get along very well. This was, I confess, as much my fault as theirs. They usually meant well. I often did not.

I found school confining, claustrophobic. I wanted out. I wanted to play ball, they wanted me to read about Dick and Jane. I wanted to run, they wanted me to sit. I wanted to explore, they wanted me to follow orders. I wanted to sing, they wanted me to be quiet. I wanted to fly, they wanted me grounded. They tried to teach me how to submit. (As a teacher, I do not think I would have wanted someone like me as a student—I could be somewhat difficult.)

Today, when I think about my attitude toward school, I am reminded of lines from a play, the author of which escapes my mind. In the play, a father makes a surprise entrance into the living room and finds his daughter and her boyfriend—just home from college—making out on the sofa. Upset, the father cries out: "Did you two sleep together?" to which the daughter replies, "Only during class lectures."

With such animosity toward school, why did I become a teacher? Revenge? A psychotic need to punish students? Perhaps. In all seriousness, I do not have *a* good reason why I was drawn to teaching. There are, however, four things of which I am aware that seemed to have an impact on my decision. First, while in college, I read Neil Postman's book, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. Postman (1969) argued that teaching—when done properly—is a truly subversive activity. By subversive, he meant to challenge orthodoxy, to question established paradigms. "I can do that!" I said.

Second, I was profoundly influenced by a few great teachers who also were great people. Harold Winkler, Steve Dale, and others served as role models for what great teachers can be. They did more than merely talk at me in a classroom. They lived lives I admired, faced problems with courage and character, and tried to do the right thing. I began to see how one could live an honorable life in a world that seemed so often to conspire to make

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us into selfish, greedy creatures. Later, mentors including William Lammers, Bill Fitzgerald, James Loughran, and Thomas Cronin continued to move, teach, and inspire me.

Third—and this brings me to the title of this article—in college, I read a poem by Richard Brautigan (1974). It was a simple poem—perhaps it was not even a good poem in the academic sense—but one that spoke volumes to me. This short poem hit me like a brick:

> *Memoirs of Jesse James*
> I remember all those thousands of hours
> that I spent in grade school
> watching the clock,
> waiting for recess or lunch or to go home.
> Waiting: for anything but school.
> My teachers could easily have ridden with Jesse James
> for all the time they stole from me.

I know I am a better teacher for having been a terrible student. So many teachers stole so many hours of my life, instilled in me not a love of learning but rather a fear of learning. I did not want to be like them: sour, boring, blindly conformist, dead. So, I became determined *not* to steal time from my students but instead to help liberate and empower them: to be for others what a few exceptional teachers were for me.

Fourth, my father. My father, who never graduated from the eighth grade—who had to leave school to go to work and raise his brothers and sisters—placed a great emphasis on education. Despite his lack of a formal education (cynics would say because of such a lack), my father was an extraordinarily educated man, a true gentleman. He achieved—with apparent ease and a naturalness quite extraordinary—a grace of mind and a mastery of intellect to which I still aspire. He was a truly educated man.

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All of this leads me in a rather circuitous way to my thoughts on teaching. How can we develop in our students an appetite for education, a love for knowledge, a hunger for the "examined life"—a life of the mind, a life of reason, *and* a life of the heart?

Teaching is a challenge. That is why it is so much fun. To be a good teacher is a demanding, difficult, time-consuming task. It requires the combination of a wide range of skills. It demands much from us, but its rewards are many.

Being a good teacher does not come naturally. It requires a great investment of time and self. It requires work. One has to have self-awareness and other-awareness, professional skill and personal skill, insight and imagination, daring and humor, commitment and character.

This is good news and bad news. The good news is that there is no great mystery about what makes a good teacher. The bad news is that we do not know what makes a good teacher great. I suppose it is something transcendent, some form of magical connection between teacher and students.

Our primary questions as faculty members are: How can we help students to learn more effectively? What are the best ways to teach in the classroom, to teach outside of the classroom, to advise (on matters academic and otherwise), to promote intellectual curiosity and development, and to challenge students to become scholars and gentlepersons? I argue that the keys to answering these questions rest in the following characteristics.

Enthusiasm

The most memorable teachers I have had were men and women who were enthusiastic about their subjects, who taught with joy, intensity, and a love of their subjects. Such enthusiasm is contagious. Great teachers are curious, they are explorers, they are puzzle solvers. They convey the importance and relevance of their subjects and the amazement of discovery.

As Thomas E. Cronin, former president of Whitman College, wrote (1991):

> Great teachers not only know their subject well, they radiate it. What invariably touches the hearts and imaginations of students is a professor's personal devotion to learning and to truth. For great teachers their subject is compelling, and their students are aroused by their commitment to it. According to an old proverb: the mediocre teacher tells; the good teacher explains, the superior teacher demonstrates; and the great teacher inspires.

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High Expectations/High Standards

Teachers who are demanding, who challenge, who expect much, who demand much (and give much) are teachers who bring the

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most out of their students. Great teachers are always persuading students to move forward, take the next step, meet the next challenge, jump the next hurdle. Better to ask more of your students than less; better to expect more of your students than less. John Stuart Mill (1873) said, "A student of whom nothing is asked that he cannot do never does all he can do." If we expect and demand top performance, we are more likely to get top performance. Great teachers demand that students extend themselves beyond where even they believe they can go.

Professional Competence

A high degree of professional competence is another essential ingredient of outstanding teaching. We cannot assume that possession of a PhD guarantees either competence as a teacher (because "teaching" generally is not taught in graduate school) or competence as a scholar. Therefore, we need peer-review systems, classroom visits, institutional support (i.e., teacher-training programs), and outside confirmation of competence (i.e., review of written and presented work by professional peers).

Personal Engagement

We teach about our subject matter, but we also teach about ourselves, about ways of life and ways of seeing the world. According to Alfred North Whitehead (1929), "There is only one subject-matter for education, and that is Life in all its manifestations."

By far the best feature of teaching is the personal contact with students. We are open to them, seeing them as co-travelers. This contact can be the most valuable educational experience of a college career for both teachers and students. Students benefit in a variety of ways but the most important is that they can see if and how our ideas are embodied in our lives. They can understand via direct experience, the benefit of an examined life.

Encourage Multidimensional Student Life

As the preceding discussion suggests, not all learning takes place in the classroom. Studies demonstrate that those students who are active in a wide range of college activities—sports, theater, student government—are happier, better adjusted, and do as well or better academically as those who concentrate solely on academic learning. The social dimension of learning therefore must become a centerpiece of the learning experience. We strive, after all, to educate the whole person.

Humor

Teaching should be fun. It should be a joy. We can take our work seriously but not take ourselves too seriously. Humor is a key ingredient in my approach to teaching. I see the world (and politics) through a slightly jaundiced eye, and I try to convey the irony as well as the substance of politics. I believe I convey it on many levels, and retaining a sense of playfulness is one important dimension to my pedagogical approach. As Cronin (1991) noted, "Teaching and learning should be fun. If it isn't, then the teacher ought to take a day or two off (or a year or two if need be) and decide what's important, what one's life is all about."

For many people, life is a burden to be endured—a hardship, painful. Such an outlook is deadly in a teacher. We need to feel the joy of life and convey that to our students. We must revel in the joy of learning, puzzle solving, and the life of the mind. If what we do is not fun for us, it will be deadly for our students.

The Importance of Scholarship

Teaching is tough and demanding. It can lead to burnout. One of the best ways to keep a lively mind and avoid the pitfalls of burnout is through active scholarship. As former Harvard University Dean Henry Rosovsky (1990) wrote:

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Personal contact can be demanding on a teacher, but studies repeatedly demonstrate that students who grow academically and personally are those who spend time with faculty members. Relationships built around academic work and social events can help students develop a sense of community, a sense of importance, a sense of self.

Today, part of my lifelong learning finds me switching places with many former students: they are now teaching me lessons about character, caring, and commitment. Outstanding graduates of our university including Paul Kan, Mary Chambers, David Herbst, Gaby Gomez, Bethany Albertson, Kent Jancarik, Maria Mancini, Matt Delja, Katherine Kennedy Allen, Chris Zepeda, and others continue to inspire and influence me by the power of their example.

> By far the healthiest and most efficient method of writing burnout is research. Unlike the somewhat grasping and passive bookworm, the researcher invests in him or herself while interacting with an international world of critics and colleagues. These are not activities congenial to deadwood or burned-out cases: they cannot share in the stimulation of give and take. A research-oriented faculty is less likely to be the home of intellectual deadwood. Active, lively, thoroughly current minds that enjoy debate and controversy make better teachers.

Active scholarship (which I understand broadly as "doin' stuff" appropriate to our discipline) is an essential component to our profession. We cannot be "college professors" if we are not scholars. Our obligation is to explore new areas, new ideas, new relationships, new possibilities and to share our pursuits with our

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students and with professional colleagues outside of our university. Professional scholarship and effective teaching are highly correlated—*especially* for those teachers who share their research, findings, and professional puzzles with students. As Cronin (1991) wrote:

> Scholarship and research freshen and enliven the substance of teaching, and they usually also enhance one's teaching by setting the example of an inquiring mind that relishes the challenge of new questions and knows how to go about getting answers.

Good teachers are almost always good scholars. They are "lifelong students" who generate knowledge and who search, probe, inquire, and question accepted wisdom. Good teachers have a hunger. We teach, research, and write because we must. We are curious (curiosity did not kill the cat, stupidity did), we are interested, and we do not "settle for less."

Dreams and Possibilities

Ours is a liberating profession—or it should be. When we are at our best, we break chains. Again, quoting Cronin (1991):

> Great teachers give us a sense not only of who they are, but more importantly, of who we are, and who we might become. They unlock our energies, our imaginations, and our minds. Effective teachers pose compelling questions, clarify choices, explain options, teach us to reason, suggest possible directions, and urge us on. The best of teachers, like to best of leaders, have an uncanny ability to step outside themselves and become liberating forces in our lives.

We also are dreamers and dream makers, thinkers, and thought makers. We open eyes and minds. This sometimes means that we must make our students uncomfortable by confronting and challenging their most cherished ideas—but so be it.

Teaching to "All" Students

It is easier to teach to an A student than a C student, but we must avoid that temptation and try to teach to *all* students. If we can do this, we often can identify C students who actually are A students waiting to be liberated. This is one of the most difficult challenges in an already difficult job, but I know that I experience more joy bringing the A out of a C student than the A out of an A student.

Students as Rebels and Conformists

Students are an odd mixture of the rebel and the conformist. On the one hand, they are at the age and stage where they feel compelled to chart their own course, "find" themselves, and celebrate their individualism. One the other hand, they can be amazingly conformist, trying to fit in, to belong.

The classroom is one of the last places on earth where free speech is (usually) honored. We must create an environment in which our students feel comfortable exercising free speech and inquiry, where they can try out new ideas, new approaches, and new ways of seeing old problems. Students, in short, must feel free to make mistakes. If they fear that every "loose" idea will incur the wrath of a professor, they usually will remain silent. Teachers can insist on high standards, crisp logic, using evidence versus mere assertion, and solid argument while still creating an environment in which students do not feel threatened or intimidated. We must help students learn from mistakes and overcome fears. They must feel that it is acceptable to reach high, stretch themselves, take risks, think bold thoughts, and chart new paths.

Thus, as teachers, we need to be open to our students, respectful of their person (especially when racial, sexual-identity, and gender differences may intervene in the learning process), and respectful of their intellect. At the same time, we can—and must—demonstrate that whereas all persons have equal value, all ideas do not. Thus, we must get to the core of ideas, expose their roots, their genesis, follow the logic of thought through the application of ideas to social problems, delineate strong ideas and arguments from weak ones, and expose the rationale and justifications of ideas.

Truth to Power

Lamentably, we cannot teach courage, but we can teach about courage and moral conviction. In a world that often seems to conspire to make us into compliant sheep, we can seek to imbue in our students a sense in which there will be times that they must make a *moral choice* and prepare them to face those tough choices. As novelist George Steiner (1979) reminded us, "We are those who come after. We know that a man can read Goethe and Schiller in the afternoon, play Bach and Mozart in the evening, and go the next day to his job at Auschwitz."

I find that the best way to do this is through example. I often rely on the examples of Thomas More and Martin Luther King to illustrate the difficulty of moral choice, as well as the integrity and honor of choosing the right path against great odds. If we produce students who are ethical illiterates, the educational experience will have been morally bankrupt and we will have failed. Our goal is to help develop a truly educated person.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN "EDUCATED PERSON"?

The art of teaching is not a mere job to be performed. Teaching is designed to enable. It strives to produce a person educated into a concept of a "coherent whole." What is this coherent whole?

An educated person is able to *think critically*. He or she leads an *examined life*. The educated person displays a deep *curiosity*, develops a *hierarchy of values*, and thinks in *degrees*, not absolutes. The educated person is comfortable in the *world of ideas*; is familiar with the various *methods* for knowing truth; is familiar with other *cultures*, *religions*, and *ways of knowing*. The educated person knows the *ways of science*, the *essence of beauty*, the *pursuit of truth*. The educated person has pondered the important and perennial questions of *humankind*. He or she has read the *great works* of the world and is comfortable discussing the *great ideas* on which humans have reflected. The educated person *thinks* with the *head* and *feels* with the *heart*. The educated person is capable of *loving* deeply and committing wholly.

An educated person should be able to *communicate* with precision and force. He or she should have an informed acquaintance with the mathematical and experimental *methods* of the sciences; with the historical and quantitative *techniques* needed for investigating the workings and development of society; with some of the important scholarly, literary, and artistic *achievements* of the past; and with the major *religious* and *philosophical* conceptions of what it is to be human. An educated American cannot be provincial; he or she should know about other cultures, languages, and times; and have an understanding of and experience in thinking about *moral and ethical problems*. An educated person should have *high aesthetic and moral standards*, be able to *reject*

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shoddiness in all of its many forms, and defend those views effectively and rationally.

The educated person defends *truth* and *justice*, even when (especially when) it is unpopular to do so. The educated person knows that *knowledge* is deserving of *sacrifice* and that, if *cultivated*, it may grow into *wisdom*. He or she believes in the *dignity of each person* and honors *human courage*.

What I have outlined—if you have not already guessed—is an impossible dream. No teacher or student could possibly reach the heights outlined here—but that is our goal, our ideal, our windmill at which we can tilt.

If we ask our students to aim high, seek much, and take risks, we must be prepared to do so ourselves. Teaching is an exhausting, time-consuming, demanding, difficult vocation. It also is intensely satisfying, enriching, and rewarding. To see the spark light up in a student's eyes, to know we have made a difference, is richly rewarding. Much is expected of us but much is returned as well. In a phrase, we teach students to learn.

In considering an example of how an educated person might respond to a real-life problem, I was drawn to a response that Robert Kennedy gave to a question about the state of the nation in 1968. At a time when our prosperity was measured by the number of telephones and televisions per household, Kennedy (1968) said this about our gross national product:

> It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It allows neither for the justice in our courts, nor for the justness of our dealings with each other. The gross national product measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to country. It measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. ■

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