

At School in Hallowell, Maine and Elsewhere

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An unkind suggestion has come from a colleague that I write on the subject of what constitutes good pedagogy. The idea is, I think, that thirty years in the classroom should have left me with some fairly firm notions about how to teach.

I've grumbled a bit about this "assignment." It is not so much that I reject the idea of method in the classroom as that my personal method has tended to vary every day of the last thirty years. Obviously, I am not offering myself as a standard for newer teachers to follow, but I did think I might conjure up an ideal figure from my academic past that could stand in my stead. After a long week's pondering I have found no one, from the first grade to the doctorate, who stands out as a neatly packaged example of what it is we should all be striving for. Was I just unlucky? I don't think so. Taken together, the many teachers of my childhood and young adulthood constitute a group remarkable for an enriching zaniness if nothing else.

For instance, there was my first grade teacher who wept whenever I refused to salute the flag or do calisthenics with the rest of the class. I objected to doing anything in unison. Noting that fact, she had me salute and touch my toes in a totally isolated scene that concluded each day. The second grade teacher (a large woman named "Gross") laughed loudly for all the grade to hear whenever I insisted — and proved — that there is one result for top-to-bottom addition and another for bottom-to-top. The third grade teacher became upset when I refused to join the class picture and chased me the length of the Maria Clark Grammar School. The fourth grade teacher liked me. I kissed her as I was leaving for home one day, forgetting that she wasn't my mother and that I wasn't leaving for school. In the fifth grade I was slapped

for firing a paper clip at the teacher as she bent to help a friend three seats ahead. The sixth grade teacher pitied me when I was forced to stay home for a month with an entirely imaginary illness. My seventh grade teacher held it against me that she had been in school with my father, and my eighth grade teacher resented openly the several garter snakes that I kept in my desk.

My best pedagogical experiences, however, came with high school. I discovered both love and fear in three different secondary schools. Love happened in Latin, French, English and History classes. Icy fear lurked in most of the others. I earned an "A" in algebra either because I was intimidated by the subject and worked hard or because I was mesmerized by the antics of the teacher. For a wall-eyed person he had an incredible aim. His ammunition was chalk which he fired at inattentive foreheads, never missing and never failing to attract attention. His first gesture on entering the room was to hurl a piece of chalk at the left rear wall from which it bounced expertly into the adjacent tray. This performance gave an initial "zing" to every class session.

Maine winters are cold, but this same teacher liked leaning half way out of the window beside his desk whenever he was explaining a problem. We were then forced to open one or more of the windows to catch his explanation. I think we all learned to concentrate in that course. Even so, the instructor often became discouraged by our stupidity. At his most despairing he would tip over the heavy table that served as his desk, fall to his knees behind it and start praying.

I remember everything about that teacher except his algebra. I recall, too, an English teacher who responded to each of my answers with a curt, "Clear as mud, Mr. Wood, clear as mud!" I preferred a younger teacher of English who

blushed when she handed back the composition in which I had declared my love. An instructor of Ancient History promised me, gratuitously it seemed to me, that I would one day go insane. He also had a habit of punctuating his advice with "A word to the wise and the *otherwise*, Mr. Wood." Please note that in those days even high school freshmen were addressed as "mister" or "miss." Now time has reversed things. At Humboldt many of my students call me "Frank" with or without my permission.

Were my public school teachers more outstanding than my college instructors that I can remember them all so well, including their names? I struggle to recall my undergraduate college teachers, and yet they collectively left me with much for which I am grateful. There was a nameless, faceless history professor who smoked chalk (chalk again!). In memory of forbidden cigarettes he raised fresh sticks of chalk to his lips after each paragraph of lecture. In a beginning German course an elderly *fräulein* from Hamburg sang DEUTSCHLAND UBER ALLES to the returned World War II veterans sitting in her class. Another German national who had lived in Mexico read an entire anthology of Spanish-American literature to his benumbed Spanish students. Six hundred pages of Spanish with a German accent! I was in both of these classes. I also had a balding French literature professor who wore large flower-laden hats in and out of class to conceal what she lacked in the way of hair. She was the great-granddaughter of a minor French poet and often recited his poems in a very unpleasant way. On the other hand, I was profoundly moved by the recitations of an English literature professor who bore an absurd resemblance to New York City's Mayor La Guardia. This man left a permanent mark on all who sat in his classes, yet he died by

his own hand, convinced that he was unable to reach his students.

I had instructors with tics, others who stuttered, lisped or blinked their eyes too much. A psychology professor struggled even in middle age with an adolescent wish for a lower voice, clearing it constantly and forcing it down after each rise to its normal pitch. I had teachers who loved to teach and others for whom it was an ever painful challenge, but no one teacher, either at the undergraduate or graduate level, offered up a discernible method, a formula, an imitable style that might serve as a guide to a student disciple. They were often remarkable as human beings, and most of them truly had something of significance to impart. Together they gave me most of what I use today as a teacher and as a member of the community in which I live and function. What they gave me doesn't translate as a pattern for specific adaptation, but in my view it has permitted me to serve academically and socially in a reasonably adequate way. If my memories of early teachers have more to do with their reaction to me than with mine to them, it is nonetheless true that those same teachers and the ones who followed them have left me with a vivid and much valued image of humanity in the classroom.