Everyone must agree that teaching is an art, not a science, although it has been my experience that science takes precedence over art in our schools. Does this mean that teaching is a lesser involvement with reality? Or, does it mean that teaching is so difficult, so complex, that it cannot be reduced to a formula, and therefore cannot be formally structured and judged by committees?

I believe that it is the latter. I believe that this is exactly what teaching is, that it is something almost too difficult to do with predictable success; too fluid, and so changeable as to prevent us from making comfortable judgments about it, even when we set out to do so in groups controlled by “goals,” “guidelines,” and the other prerequisites to security.

I also believe that teaching is of primary significance in influencing the lives of men and women, and that humans should teach other humans. Looking back, who does not remember those (one or two; maybe three) teachers who made the difference in our fumbling search for what we are now, and what we still hope to become? Mr. Kirkbride, who was my agronomy teacher in high school in 1928, used earthy metaphors to show me a way beyond my fears; Mr. Mendelowitz taught me where and how it takes guts in Art; and, Mrs. Purdie, who taught me that if I really wanted to overcome, I could—all have been life companions, although two are no longer alive. What did these special teachers do to other students who crossed their paths?

It is difficult to tell who is a “good” teacher. But as a teacher, I have some ideas: teaching is so difficult that most of us are really not “good” teachers. Teachers who use teaching to finance or provide stepping stones to other goals obscure the great teaching done by the special few, and the partial achievements of the rest of us who finished behind the winners. They make it easy for scoffers to draw a crowd by saying such things as “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.”

In order to avoid the full responsibility for teaching and doing it well, some plan curriculums in which they can feel safe. They join groups who manage to secure respectability, and even prestige, for such planning. No one is quite happy about it, but it is safer, especially when the planning is unrealistic and the teacher does not take full responsibility for what is learned. The best chances for good teaching are found in courses where the teacher manages the environment in an informal way, and is free to make sure that the content is treated formally, and with respect.

Giving grades is a fact of life, like gravity and evolution. They have a place in learning, and can be letters of the alphabet, with plusses and minuses. They can be used to curry favor, to gain popularity with certain groups, fill classrooms, provide supporting data for curriculum expansion, and to get promoted. Or, grades can be used to assist learning. In the latter case, the grades will be invalid, but consistent. In the former, grades will be both invalid and inconsistent.

Teachers should be directly responsible for their curriculums, and in charge of their teaching areas and enrollments. They should be responsible for what is learned and not employed as managers of groups. Teachers must expect to be embarrassed often and not hope for a time in their careers when the butterflies and embarrassments are eliminated.

Teachers should be proud and able to bear up gracefully under their degrees, grants, and other impedimentae. They should believe the really important thing is to learn something, while feeling slightly ill at ease about what they are doing except when they cannot find much wrong with some teaching they have done recently.
Teachers talk too much. They do it to impress people or because they are hard of hearing, or because they get a bang out of seeing someone learn, especially if they had something to do with it. Teaching is done in two ways. Teachers either help others to develop the courage to make choices, or they say "open up" and stuff in all that will not run out again.

Most teachers will not agree that there are two ways of knowing whether oneself is still here. Many teachers believe that we are aware only when we are amassing a great number of labels for occurrences and things to be analyzed, approved, and filed. Some teachers believe that perceptions based on healthy and functioning intuitions are equal to, and correlative with, labels and opinions known as "facts." Some teachers will not even toy with the possibility that everyone, at times, in order to resolve a personal dilemma, must turn to the infallibility of their intuitions.

Teachers are willing to pay the price. Whether they pay it for amassing labels and facts, or by wrestling their intuitions out into the light where they can be used in making judgments, they pay in full. Many teachers believe that this is what they should be paid for. Some teachers believe that they should get paid only for teaching; that to be used to help administer the curriculum is to be misused; and that their continued progress as searchers for reality gives them the proper license to guide others.

Mr. Kirkbride (mostly bald with tufts, always smiling, out of shape); Mr. Mendelowitz (wise, twinkly, ready to take on the Stanford faculty in matters of principle and did, full of really funny stories that always fit); and Mrs. Purdie (middle-aged handsome, hard-edge with a smile, lover of doers): all convinced me that teaching is as good a job as any other. They acted like it was better. By their presence and with their constant and intrepid attacks on my ignorance they moved my orbit perceptibly a little to this side or that, in a permanent way. They were willing, if necessary, to be almost too human—vulnerable, imperfect (maybe I mean honest)—and they persevered while all the time their pride and convictions shone down on me to keep me unconfused about what was going on.

If great teachers reveal a constant in their Art, it is that they are true rebels. They are not to be confused with malcontents or people who like to control other people. They are rebels in the sense of the word's origins, when it was used to denote individuals in the animal world who were loners; ones who did not join the herd and for that reason were often unnerving to others. As teachers they are those who are convinced of the reality of certain matters and who are in favor of things. They use their convictions and energy to expose what they perceive to be reality. They seem to find little credence in innovation as compared to what is still to be found. As teachers they find the exercise of politics an aberration. Without assuming that they do, they pledge vitam impendere vero.

Is it possible, that in any serious discussion of what constitutes the Art of Teaching, we must begin with the willingness to also enquire into the constitution of a rebel?