Teaching in the Face of Fear

If we want to improve the quality of college teaching, a million workshops on methodology will not be enough. Good teaching does not come from technique. It comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. If we want to teach well, we must learn more about the human dimensions of our craft—about the inward sources of our teaching, about the claims it makes on our lives, about our relations with our students, about a teacher's wounds and powers.

When we enter the conversation about teaching not through the door marked "How To Do It" but through one marked "The Human Condition," we discover a new world of discourse, a world that will challenge but also reward us if we are willing to engage what we find there. When I first opened that door, I quickly saw what I would need to confront—and its name is fear. When I teach poorly, it is not because of poor technique but because I have allowed fear to get the upper hand. In the bad classrooms I suffered as a student, fear nearly always lurked backstage. In fact, the culture of the academy itself is as fearful as any I have known. Education's nemesis is not ignorance but fear. Fear gives ignorance its power.

We are always teaching in the face of fear; that is why we need "the courage to teach." This fear has at least three sources: It comes from our dominant way of knowing, from the lives of our students, and from our own adult souls. In order to learn more about the kind of courage it takes to teach, and teach well, I want briefly to explore these three forms of fear that too often paralyze education.

I. A Fearful Way of Knowing

Objectivism, the academy's most prized way of knowing, is marked by its insistence that only at a distance can we know things truly and well. Objectivism imagines that by removing ourselves from nature or history or a text we can make truth-claims untainted by any personal bias—a fantasy, but a persistent one. This mode of knowing has been advanced with such arrogance that it is difficult to see the fear behind it. But objectivism is riddled with fear: fear of subjectivity, and fear of the demands that relational knowing might make on our lives.

Our fear of subjectivity breeds teaching that deals more in external facts than in inner wisdom. That kind of teaching creates the most dangerous creatures on earth: people who know much about the outer world but who know little about their inner selves, who have technical competence but no understanding of their own drives and desires. Our fear of relational knowing breeds teaching that tries to give us power over the world rather than mutuality with it. That kind of teaching makes us into something even more dangerous: people who want to transform the world but who refuse to be transformed. "Knowledge is
power," we say with pride. But an education that puts us "in charge" is not so much about power as about fear-fear of the world itself, and of how our lives might be changed if we let the world talk back to us.

The courage to teach means defying these objectivist distortions and presenting the life of the mind for what it is—not a way of removing ourselves from things, but a way of recovering relatedness where it might otherwise be lost.

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Why does an historian think about the "dead" past? Not to kill it off, but to bring it to life, to help us understand our links with that which seems long-gone. Why does a biologist think about voiceless nature? Not to muffle it more, but to give it voice so we can hear what it needs from us. Why does a literary scholar think about "fictional" works? Not to distance them from reality, but to show that reality can never be understood except in concert with the imagination.

Courageous teachers will find ways to overcome the objectivist fear of feeling and relationship, ways to draw students into community with every subject of study. They will go beyond one-way education in which we look at the world and change it. They will help students understand the daunting words of the poet Rilke: "There is no place at all that is not looking at you—you must change your life."

II. The Fear in Our Students

When I ask faculty to name the biggest obstacle to good teaching, they often say "bad students." The hallmark of bad students, known to all who teach, is silence: that vast, stupefying, terrifying silence that comes over our classes whenever we ask a question. When I ask faculty what they think the silence means, they usually interpret it as a sign of indifference, cynicism, or hostility—or they suggest that their students are essentially brain-dead, due to the impact of mass culture on their lives.

Because this diagnosis leads to educational "cures" that are easily as cynical as the disease, we need an alternative diagnosis, and a powerful one is at hand. The silence of our students is the same silence we have known in other settings: It is the silence of blacks in the presence of whites, of women in the presence of men, of the powerless in the presence of people with power. It is the silence of marginal people, people who have been told that their voice has no value, people who maintain silence in the presence of the enemy because in silence there is safety. Student silence is normally not the product of ignorance or indifference or cynicism. It is a silence born of fear.
Recently I was teacher-for-a-day at a midwestern university. Thirty students attended my class; twenty-nine of them may well have been ready to learn. But in the back row was the one I call "the student from hell." His cap hid his eyes. His jacket was snapped shut. He had achieved an anatomically impossible supine position in his desk-chair, and no notebook or pencils were in evidence. I made the classic mistake of the greenest teacher: I ignored the twenty-nine and became obsessed with drawing out the thirtieth. And I failed. I left the class angry at him, sorry for myself, and eager to flee the campus and return home. But before I could leave, I had to eat dinner with the president and some of the faculty, all of whom wanted to talk about "good teaching." Feeling like a fraud, I was relieved when dinner ended and the president ushered me to the college van which was to haul me to the airport, ninety minutes away. I was relieved, that is, until I got into the van and discovered that my driver was "the student from hell."

But no sooner had we pulled out of the driveway than my driver began to talk. His father was a laborer who thought that his son's professional dreams were nonsense: Had I ever been in that position, he wanted to know, and what would I advise him to do? On and on he talked, I talked, we talked--about family, education, friendship, values, and vocation. We had that rare and precious thing, a real conversation.

I hope never to forget that students from hell are made, not born, made by discouragements that have filled them with fear and spawned the sullen anger fear often hides behind. The courage to teach is not to ignore or punish these voiceless ones, but to find ways (in the wonderful words of the feminist theologian Nelle Morton) to "hear them into speech"--for their own sake and for the sake of the truths that the rest of us need to hear.

III. Our Own Fearful Hearts

"Writing is easy," someone once said. "You just sit down and open a vein." Teaching is an equally vulnerable act, performed, as it is, at the dangerous intersection of the public and the personal. To teach well, I must reveal things about which I care deeply—not the intimate details of my life, but subjects that I find crucial and compelling, that have helped shape who I am. The courage to teach is the courage to risk the judgment that comes when I expose my passions to public scrutiny.

When we talk about the scrutiny that faculty fear, we think most often of peer reviews made to determine raises, promotions, and tenure. But I think there is another source of fear in us easily as powerful as peer judgment but hardly ever named: our fear of the judgment of the young. Nature decrees that youth be dependent upon age; human nature
decrees that the converse be true as well. When the young do not consent to be mentored by the elders, something vital has been taken from the elders' lives.

My story about "the student from hell" is only partly about his fear of the classroom and his need to be "heard into speech." It is also about my fear of him and my failure to deal creatively with our relatedness. It is painful when our students seem to put us beyond the pale, to view us as irrelevancies, irritants, the enemy. Some faculty respond by pandering to students. Others insist that student opinion means nothing to them; they often strike me as teachers with old, deep wounds bandaged in layers of protective cynicism.

Psychoanalyst Eric Erickson says that health in middle-age (and all teachers are middle-aged) means choosing "generativity" over stagnation. Cynicism and pandering are forms of stagnation, responses borne of fear. To be generative is to turn around and help nurture the new life emerging behind our backs. Health comes when we have the courage to acknowledge that, even as the young need our guidance, we need their vitality to help us live fully and well. When we have the courage to teach in that spirit (and to accept the vulnerability that comes with it), we have planted the seeds of authentic community between those who teach and learn.

Authentic community—with our subjects, with our students, with our fellow teachers, and with our own souls—is at once the empowering outcome and renewing wellspring of the courage to teach.


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