

NEVER READ KAFKA

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Over the years of researching schools and exploring all sorts of issues, one question consistently arises; it is the matter of what makes for a good teacher. To be sure, there are hundreds if not thousands of books and articles on this topic, but just as valuable are the words of those men and women who, for any number of reasons, are designated by their students and colleagues as being outstanding teachers.

My technique of locating these teachers, actually, is hardly scientific. After visiting schools for a period of time I eventually ask as many people as possible, faculty, staff and students, who do you consider to be among the best teachers in the school? Typically, the names come forth with surprising consistency; there is, in other words, some agreement on the nominees. But even if there isn't, it is always rewarding to speak with teachers whose colleagues and students deem them outstanding. One cannot converse with these women and men without learning something about teaching, and something about themselves as teachers.

What follows is but one of many conversations I have had with one of these so-called "chosen" teachers. Indeed, in his high school, located in a Northeastern city, when I asked that simple question: "Who do you consider to be a top teacher?" this man's name came up again and again. Still only in his early thirties, his own educational background allows him to teach both in the English and History departments, although his major interests these days seem to be leaning toward history.

In the end, I am not certain that anyone could ever construct a perfect inventory of the human qualities required to become a superb teacher. I can say only that the experience of speaking with teachers like the one whose words are recounted below, invariably reminds me of just how precious this art of teaching

is, and just how valuable are the people who practice it at such consistently high levels.

"I vowed I would never love them, never turn them into my friends. This was a willful effort. I knew from my own experiences in school that the best classes, the classes where I really learned were those where teachers were stern and tough, disciplined, when there wasn't so much effort made to get close to students and touch students and lament their problems as if they were psychically your own.

"I remember in graduate school a teacher who seemed to be pushing for a closeness, intimacy, pushing for all the psychological goo and stuff of helping kids work out their identity issues and their psychosexual diseases with their parents. Then I read Piaget and it was a breath of fresh air--not that he is easy to read. One longs for Kant. Here was someone interested in the way children learn, how their mind works. Piaget had the noble approach. He had it with ducks as well as children. Don't think of children as stupid, but don't spend your life either trying to get to the root of their problems, their psyche, their armor, their unconscious. You can work hard with people and show them the utmost respect merely by helping them to learn to get excited with various fields of inquiry. What possibly can be wrong with that? In the end, if children cannot read and think and write they will be lost souls. Yes, you reward them for their daily efforts, but you don't have to celebrate errors of fact and absence of knowledge, or looseness in thinking, or plain old fashioned unenlightened outlooks.

"And why cannot the teacher advance moral precepts? I asked my colleagues over and over again. When you tell your class, 'please don't speak while someone else has the floor,' you are then and there teaching moral precepts whether you like it or not. And you outright lie when you advocate tolerance

because you will eventually reach the point of backing off from it. Tolerate gays? Yes. Tolerate interfaith marriages? Yes. Tolerate Nazism? Huh? Do I hear a swell of yesses now? So why not make it explicit! All they could say, my precious colleagues, was we don't teach morality; we hold up various behaviors and help students clarify their positions, moral and otherwise on these subjects. The kids aren't the only ones exhibiting loose thinking.

"It never made sense. I never desired sternness, coldness, aloofness. I wanted students to understand and appreciate that what they were learning had great value for later in their lives: Better jobs, better feelings about themselves, better human status in the world community. There is a degree to which learning and academic advancement require postponement of gratification. There ought to be a joy in the learning process but it cannot always be consummated. I'm sorry; it's the nature of the beast, and it remains a very valuable beast. I believed I had a very substantial and defensible position, despite the students and some faculty who called me cool, or aloof, or dare I even utter the word, unloving.

"And then one night I had this dream. I had been reading a book on dreams when I fell asleep and now, suddenly, I am immersed in a huge cave with spider webs hanging down from darkened walls and clay like ceilings. It is ominous in there, escape seems impossible. I am frightened, and helpless. Then suddenly, this football player appears. He seems totally comfortable with the same circumstances that confront and frighten me. As we begin to talk I realize I know all about him for some reason, which impresses him and endears me to him. Now we are walking with his arm around me and I have this thought, is one of us or both of us gay? No, I assure myself, he is simply being protective and gregarious, although I am startled by his lengthy references to Dante, Schiller, Goethe, Milton, Socrates. I ask him, with all your prodigious reading, I must assume you have read Kafka as well. This statement causes him to turn

angry, almost furious. He brusquely takes his arm off my shoulder as if I have deeply insulted him. Never, never, never read Kafka. It is obscene literature and must not be shown to children. Terrified by his response and fearing that he won't help me out of the cave, I reply: 'Oh, no, you are absolutely correct. I hope you understood my sarcasm, my irony, my sardonic wit. I knew of course that you would not like Kafka. Of course, of course I knew that.' He looks at me, for a long time I remember, and then smiles and puts his arm back around my shoulder and we are once again walking along some avenue within the cave. I imagine that we are on our way out for I feel relieved.

"I wake up terrified, but the terror quickly subsides when I realize it is just a dream. But for a day or two afterward I walk around feeling sad, melancholy--I use that word since I actually had found myself reading *Mourning and Melancholia* over the preceding week. You know it? Sadness, a terrific sadness haunted me for a couple of days. My mind wandered, my work, actually, suffered. For the first time ever, after teaching school for more than nine years, I think I began to seriously contemplate not teaching anymore. At any level.

"The sadness continued. I stopped reading the Freud, and then one morning, probably after another dream, I believe, I felt as if I had awakened to the meaning of the first dream. It began with the figure of the football player, a man I imagined who must have resembled some guy my dad went to college with who became a professional player. This always mattered to my father, somehow, that a friend of his actually played with the pros. But the clue for me was the reference to Kafka, and my demurring, cowardly retreat. Kafka is the one writer who conjures up in me the awful, unbearable pain of the relationship between father and son. I can barely read Kafka. I try not to assign him, but it's inescapable. So when the football player tells me, never read Kafka, I knew somehow the dream was about not facing something with my father.

"The choice of Mourning and Melancholia provided another piece of this mysterious puzzle, a puzzle I obviously have been repressing for years. The entire nature of my relationship with my father has been one of delayed gratification. Everything for him was a moral lesson. Every act, intellectual or otherwise was one of utter seriousness, as if a time bomb were ticking and the entire civilization had but moments left to survive. My whole life has been lived, or was lived until that time, by something I think Brecht once said: 'He who is laughing obviously hasn't heard the horrible news.' And the horrible news was that he could not love me. Everything was in the effort, everything was in the activity, everything was in the final product, the accomplishment, the success, or at least the enormous effort that one was willing to make for the success. But there was no love. There could be no love for love softens people, makes them in to anything but tough, hard nosed football heroes.

"I saw it all. My classroom philosophy, and demeanor I must add, though not entirely without foundation, were built essentially on my reaction to my father's inability to genuinely love me. The age old expression holds most true for him: He did the best he could. He thought he loved me, he imagined he loved me. Had I ever questioned him on the matter he would surely have argued vociferously for his love--how could he not! But the fact is I could never have asked that question for fear of the response I think I must have gotten when the football player admonishes me, never read Kafka. Never ask your father whether he loves you unless you are prepared to experience a pain that will cause you to feel melancholia and mourn for the rest of your days.

"It took me several weeks, months perhaps, to put the final connection on this matter, namely that I had unconsciously decided to withhold love from my students, just as my father had withheld his love. I withheld it too, for fear that had I offered it, it would not be requited. I withheld it because I felt it was a

man's duty and obligation to provide strength and seriousness and armored morality in school. The rest belonged to the realm of women. But don't mistake this. This has nothing to do, I feel, with being feminine or gay or bi. It has to do with awakening a pain, an ache, a heart ache I must have lived with all my life that the worshipping of my father, as people worship football players, meant that any reward that might come from work could not be the frivolous, joyous, comforting, and life affirming reward that only love can bring. Only months before I had read something I had never ever known, that Freud himself had written that love is the grand educator.

"It is so wondrously strange, there are dreams in sleep and dreams in wakefulness, there simply are so many fewer pieces of armor during sleep, and so many pieces of wonderful irony, enough to fuel my literature classes for centuries, along with a love of books and the children who hopefully will read them with me. And you know, of course, that my father too, was a high school teacher."

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