

“You the Teacher”: Lessons Before Teaching

“You the teacher.” Jefferson has been convicted of a murder he did not do. The defense attorney, to spare Jefferson the electric chair, has just told the judge that Jefferson is not much better than a hog and that execution would accomplish nothing. Jefferson’s grandmother, Miss Emma, asks Grant the young local school teacher to teach Jefferson to be a man, so he’ll die a man and not a hog. Grant hopelessly asks: “What do you want me to do? What can I do? It’s only a matter of weeks, a couple of months, maybe. What can I do that you haven’t done the past twenty-one years?” Miss Emma’s simple, confident response is “You the teacher.”

This summer I’ve been reading teacher narratives, both fiction and non-fiction, to determine what characterizes a “good” teacher and to strengthen my own teaching. I also question with Grant, “What can I do? It’s only a matter of weeks, a couple of months, maybe. What can I do that hasn’t been done the past eighteen, nineteen, twenty-two years?” Then I’m reminded, “You the teacher.” I’d like to share with you some insights I’ve gained by getting into the lives of teachers, and Ernest J. Gaines’s novel *A Lesson Before Dying* has given me a start for “‘You the Teacher’: A Lesson Before Teaching.”

A teacher must be a fighter. Jesse Stuart shares a personal experience of fighting in *The Thread That Runs so True: A Mountain School-Teacher Tells His Story*.” Stuart is a seventeen-year-old teacher in a dilapidated one-room school in Lonesome Valley, Kentucky during the 1920s. His heavily-bearded, nineteen-year-old first grader Guy Hawkins comes into the classroom to “whip” his teacher. Here is the account:

When he rushed at me, I side-stepped. He missed. By the time he had turned around, I caught him a haymaker on the chin that reeled him. Then I followed up with another lick as hard as I had ever hit a man. Yet I didn’t bring him down. He came back for more. But he didn’t reach me this time. . . . I dove through the air with a flying tackle. I hit him beneath the knees. . . . His feet went under him, and I scooted past on the pine floor. I’d tackled him so quickly when he had expected me to come back at him with my fists, that he went down so fast he couldn’t catch with his hands. His face hit flat against the floor and his nose was flattened. The blood spurted as he started to get up. I let him get to his feet. I wondered if I should. For I knew it was either him or me. One of us had to whip. When he did get to his feet after that terrible fall, I waded into him. I hit fast and I hit hard.

Stuart’s classroom is different than ours, but teachers must be fighters. I’m not suggesting blood stains in the Smith classrooms or on the Annex floors, but teachers need to believe in what they’re doing. They need to believe that teaching matters, that teaching is a worthy profession, that teachers can reach students, that what we teach can change lives. In technical writing I have students declare to the rest of the class why their disciplines are the most significant discipline in the world, why the rest of the world can’t exist without their profession. Students soon gain a sense of passion for what they want to do. As teachers, we need to have a passion and a fight for teaching.

Mr. Kaplan's voice dropped to a whisper. "But he ken't slip. Now is bodderink him de idea fromm life. 'Vat is de life altogadder?' tinks Julius Scissor. An' he gives enswer, de pot I like de bast. 'Life is like a bum actor, strottink an' hollerink arond de stage for only vun hour bafore he's kicked ot. Life is a tale told by idjots, dat's all, full of fonny sonds an' phooey!'"

Mr. Parkhill could be silent no longer. "Full of sound and fury!" he cried desperately. But inspiration, like an irresistible force, swept Mr. Kaplan on.

"Life is monkey business! It don't minna ting. It signifies nottink!' An' den Julius Scissor closses his ice fest--" Mr. Kaplan demonstrated the Consul's exact ocular process in closing his "ice" --"--an' falls dad!"

The class was hushed as Mr. Kaplan stopped. In the silence, a tribute to the fertility of Mr. Kaplan's imagination and the power of his oratory, Mr. Kaplan went to his seat. But just before he sat down, as if adding a postscript, he sighed: "Dat vas mine idea. But ufcawss is all wronk, becawss Mr. Pockheel said de voids ain't abot Julius Scissor altogadder. It's all abot an Irishman by de name Macbat."

Mr. Kaplan is wrong, but he's also right from his own perspective. Our students are also right in their own minds. For years I've remembered a comment by Mina Shaunnesy that students do not intentionally make mistakes. They do what they do for a reason. As teachers we need to identify what that reason is and then guide students into understanding their misinterpretation.

Teachers need to be experienced. E.R. Braithwaite is an experienced teacher. He, however, is not a trained teacher. In his personal account of *To Sir, With Love*, Braithwaite has grown up in British New Guinea, graduated from City University of New York, and from Oxford with degrees in engineering, and served in the Royal Air Force during World War II. He is an experienced man. For two years after the war, Braithwaite is unemployed, not because of his experience, his education, or his talents; he is unemployed because of his color. He takes the only job that he can find--to teach forty-six students in the slums of West London, students who don't believe in education and who don't believe in themselves. But Braithwaite, who insists on being called "Sir" and on calling students "Mr." and "Miss" teaches about life by sharing his experiences and encouraging students to share their own experiences. Sir brings the outside world into the classroom, and at times takes the classroom outside to new worlds for the students. Good teachers teach students about life through their subjects.

Teachers need to be in their prime. We need to give students our best. Muriel Spark in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* portrays one teacher who knows she's in her prime. Miss Brodie gathers her students around her to share her best ideas, her best lessons, her best examples, her best self. Her students feel that they are the *crème de la crème*. We need to make our students feel that they are significant to us, because they are. We need to make them ours. Miss Brodie for being such an influential teacher does, however, have a serious flaw--she imposes her own personal agenda onto her captive students. Because of her students' devotion to Miss Brodie, they do what she wants them to do even though it is immoral. We should remember that what we say and do in the classroom can have a lasting consequence in our students' lives, and unfortunately, the lessons we teach are not always the lessons we intend to teach. We've all had experiences of students misinterpreting what we intend to say or what we have done. We need to be at our conscious best, at our prime, at all times.

Teachers need to be failures. I know you're not expecting lessons in failure here today, but good teachers fail as well as succeed. Bel Kaufman has learned that lesson in *Up the Down Staircase*. She meets success with Jose Rodriguez who has seen himself as a nobody, but because of her genuine interest and willingness to reach out to him, Jose writes his concluding note to her and says, "You helped me with better knowledge also respect. You gave me a push to take out a Library Card and get more meanings from my readings. You have been as wonderful as my own mother to me and I loved my mother very much while she was here. I guess I love you just about the same. You are the neatest teacher in the school." But Kaufmann has failed with Joe Ferone because she can't reach him no matter how far she stretches. And the insensitive English teacher Barringer corrects Alice Blake's love confession which thoughtless action leads her to a near-successful suicide. We need to admit that we are failures at times with some lessons and with some students. But those failures should motivate us to anticipate the consequences of what we do. And we should constantly strive to improve our teaching to better influence our students and to achieve more success in and out of the classroom.

Teachers need to be prepared. Two of the most daily-prepared teachers in the books I've read this summer are the real-life teachers Stacey Bess and Pat Conroy. These teachers teach in conditions that most would find impossible. Bess's account of teaching multi-grades of shifting students in a Salt Lake homeless shelter is *Nobody Don't Love Nobody*. Conroy, a Peace Corp teacher on Yamacraw Island, South Carolina, shares his experiences in *The Water is Wide*. Neither of these teachers expected such heart-wrenching conditions and experiences as they interacted with students. Many people would only give the minimum as they face such overwhelming odds, but Bess and Conroy would prepare and over-prepare for each day, each class, each lesson, and each student. These teachers would experiment with approaches, with assignments, with activities. They would be spontaneous only after careful preparation had provided them with a solid foundation and framework to become the basis for their flexibility. Daily preparation becomes the means for teachers to become successful and thorough.

Teachers need to be professionals. Teachers must be experts in their own fields. I've not forgotten Francis Christensen who recognized that he was a professor professing to teach but not knowing what he was teaching. Sometimes teachers may feel that way, but we must continually learn about our profession and our discipline. An teacher who has helped me is Mike Rose. I reread his two books and am still learning from him. In *Lives on the Boundary*, Rose focuses on underprepared, remedial, illiterate, and intellectually deficient college students. By describing his own disadvantaged background, Rose introduces strategies for identifying and helping marginal students. And these students are here at Ricks College--ask Jim Papworth about his experience this summer with a 215 student who has been passed off from class to class with a sixth-grade reading and writing level. A second motivational book by Mike Rose is *Possible Lives: The Promise of Public Education in America*. Rose takes us into the classrooms of individual teachers across the country--from blue-collar Los Angeles to Mexican-American border towns; from South Side of Chicago to rural Montana; from Mississippi and Kentucky to Baltimore and New York City. Rose shows how intellectually and socially rich public education is because of everyday teachers. These teachers give us inspirational ideas to incorporate into our own classes.

And teachers need to be healers. The most influential book I've read this summer is R. F.

Delderfield's *To Serve Them All My Days*. Perhaps I've enjoyed this book so much because Larry Thompson recommended it, and I read his marked up copy. Delderfield tells the story of a shell-shocked World War I soldier David Powlett-Jones whose doctor sends him to teach at a rural boys' school. The doctor and the headmaster believe teaching will heal Powlett-Jones. The novel does demonstrate the healing process of teaching and interacting with students as we follow Powlett-Jones's career from World War I to the beginning of World War II. We see his association with memorable boys, with fellow teachers, with parents, with the community, and with administrators. We see that he is not only healed, but as a teacher he becomes part of the healing process for others in his life. Teachers are the means for students to discover themselves, and sensitive teachers cautiously guide students in that self-discovery. And when teachers sincerely believe in their students' potential, then lives, including our own, are changed. We not only can become healers to students' painful lives, but we also can be healed.

So, You-The-Teachers! What lessons have you learned before teaching? What strengths have you acquired before teaching? What weaknesses need work before teaching? We're about to enter the classroom again, not only to teach our subjects which mean a lot to us, but more important, we are about to teach our students to be men and women, divine men and divine women, not hogs. We are about to teach these men and women the lessons of our and their lives. We the teacher!