

Learn and Live: Some Thoughts about Teaching

Teaching is an act of faith. I have long given up the expectation that I will see and enjoy immediate results in my teaching. The things I really want students to know—how to live well, how to be and do good, how to think about the wonders of the world and the mysteries of being alive—are not things that can be measured by tests, grades, or evaluations. I can only hope that my influence will someday have a salutary effect in their lives and that consequently I will contribute modestly to making the world a better place.

Accepting that the real value of my teaching is manifested in the future has transformed my way of thinking about what I teach and how I teach it. Five years—maybe five weeks!—after my course, most students will have little recollection of the material we studied. But they will remember me. For better or worse, the way I comport myself, treat others, and approach the business of learning is what makes an indelible impression. The Hasidic tradition of Judaism relates the story of Leib Saras who returned from a visit to his rabbi and was asked by family and friends what words of Torah he learned. Leib Saras replied, “I did not go to my teacher to hear his words of Torah; I went to see how he ties his shoelaces.” I am very much aware that many of my students are there to see my shoelaces, and those who aren’t, observe them anyway.

What I want my students to see in me is a real individual who aspires never to stop learning, a person who struggles to understand the world and to live a life of genuineness and sincerity, one who often falls short of that aspiration and gets discouraged, and yet tries again. It is more important to me that they regard me as a master of learning than as a master of a subject. As teacher, my goal is to be the best student in the classroom. I want students to learn from me how to learn, how to teach themselves, and to see the value of never giving up the spirit of inquiry and curiosity.

Foremost among my pedagogical aspirations is humility, but I confess this is more an ideal than a reality. I have come to prize humility as the greatest of virtues, but I lament how far away from me it often is. Humility is imperative to the work of learning, and hence of teaching. The students I have found to be the hardest to teach are those who lack humility; it is difficult to inspire someone who thinks he or she already knows. Seeking to be humble as a teacher means recognizing my own limitations both as student (there are still so many things I do not know and never will) and about how best to encourage and inspire others to learn. Being humble means striving to keep learning how to teach.

I have also come to embrace the virtue of risk and its companion courage, although, again, I make no special claims to having attained either. I have learned that becoming a better teacher means risking innovation, trying out new approaches and new ideas. Taking pedagogical risks has to be done with courage, because it is quite possible to fail.

But I’m consoled by the words of one worthy philosopher: “You can ultimately succeed only at unimportant things. The loftiest things in life often end in failure.” Because learning and teaching are among the most important things in life, it is inevitable that we will sometimes fail at them. The best teachers, I believe, make that moment the occasion for another lesson.