

‘ACCUSTOMED TO THE LIGHT’: A PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING

by David King

At first, when any of them is liberated and compelled suddenly to stand up and turn his neck round and walk and look towards the light, he will suffer sharp pains; the glare will distress him, and he will be unable to see the realities of which in his former state he had seen the shadows; and then conceive someone saying to him, that what he saw before was an illusion, but that now, when he is approaching nearer to being and his eye is turned towards more real existence, he has a clearer vision, what will be his reply?

Plato, Book VII of *The Republic* “The Allegory of the Cave”

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: and he opened his mouth, and taught them.

The Gospel According to St. Matthew 5:1

Some years ago, while teaching an introductory literature course for an early morning audience of bleary eyed sophomores, I read an answer to an exam question that so tickled me I have never forgotten it. Our class had finished a unit on short stories, and the exam consisted of a series of quotes from the stories that the students were to identify according to author, title, speaker, and thematic significance.

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One quote was taken from “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” found in *The Gospel According to St. Luke*. Most of the students were native Georgians, and living in the buckle of the Bible-Belt, as they did, the story was quite familiar to them. But one student, who had never read the story before—nor much of anything else, I suspect—was confused by the language of the King James Version.

The quote I selected for the exam was simple enough, I thought. It’s the moment when the older son, baffled by his father’s loving forgive-

ness, protests the welcome his wayward brother receives. The older brother says, “Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment; and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.”

Now, we had spent some time on this story. We had discussed its theological implications and its insights into human nature, including the indiscretion of youth, the capacity of the human

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heart to forgive, and its sad leanings as well toward jealousy. I thought the quote was a give-away question that would be welcomed on the exam. So I was surprised, saddened, and I admit, amused when I read this particular student’s answer:

In this passage, the boy says to Lo, his father, that he wants a son of his own to give a party.

Of course, the fact that I’ve never forgotten this sweet display of innocent ignorance owes in part to the comedy of the incident. It is a funny story. Like most funny stories, however, it embodies some element of sadness. The student believed she was right; I knew she was very wrong, and I still regret that in my class she made that silly mistake. I quote Plato, then Jesus, at the beginning of this essay because I consider them master teachers, keepers of two divergent yet fundamental approaches to Western education. I quote them also because they must have been two of the most frustrated teachers who ever lived. It’s easy to imagine Plato, strolling home from the Academy with Socrates, muttering about his thick-headed students. Never mind that Socrates is soon to die on the high altar of misguided educational pedagogy; Plato can worry only about his class. Pity Jesus, too, for after pouring his heart out during “The Sermon on the Mount,” his students are “astonished.” Then, according to the Gospel account, they get hungry.

It must be a universal truth that teachers are destined for frustration because of students who seem apathetic, narrow minded, even bored. Yet it must also be true, throughout time, that the best teachers never succumb entirely to dismay, for the finest instructors, I believe, act always out of love. I'm not in it for the money, goes the old cliché. No, I'm afraid I'm not. Nor can I admit to subscribing to the witticism that "those who can, do. Those who can do more, teach." Such things belong on T-shirts, bumper stickers, and faculty lounge bulletin boards. Lord help me if I ever resort to this kind of thinking.

It reminds me of an old *New Yorker* cartoon, in which a thirsty, sun-burned wanderer comes upon a crowd of people in a desert wasteland. *No*, reads the caption, *we don't have any water. We're just a support group.*

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Don't be alarmed. I'm not talking about dating students. I mean the love of a discipline, the belief, however naive, that the study of language and literature somehow makes the world a finer place. I mean the love we harbor for our old professors, the ones who showed us the way, the ones we admire and emulate in our own classrooms; in short, the ones we loved. I mean loving the joy of a classroom's laughter at hearing "The Miller's Tale," which at six hundred years old still reveals the essential earthiness of humanity, loving the deep looks of reflection that come over students' faces when they read a meditation upon romance or death, loving the urgent cacophony of 20 voices at once expressing 20 different opinions about their country's literature and what it says about their own sense of being. I mean, too, loving the quiet student who finally speaks, and the arrogant student who admits he is wrong, and the sleepy-eyed sloucher in the back of the room who turns in the most brilliant paper of the semester. Finally, I mean loving and treasuring the honor and privilege contained in the act of sharing with other human beings something that we love ourselves.

Is there any buzz, any sense of elation, that compares to driving home after a particularly satisfying class? You want to tell your colleagues, your family, your friends about the way you and your students just set the world afire. In the end, you keep it to yourself. By the time you're back at

the office or at home, the feeling subsides. But you're hooked now, and like the addict, you can't wait until your next fix.

When I was a boy, my mother gave me an American literature anthology that I read until the pages fell apart at the seams and the cover developed bare spots. When I was in third grade, Ms. Caylor wrote on my report card that she expected to see my name in lights. In the agony of high school, Mr. Howell encouraged me to write poems, and Mr. Blankenship read my term paper aloud in class.

When I got to college, Dr. Smith showed me, as though I was being shown for the first time, how to read deeply. In graduate school, Dr. Kramer and Dr. Sessions reaffirmed for me the presence of mystery in our fallen, ordinary world. All of these teachers, and others besides, acted in the spirit of love I have described. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, they'd seen the light, yet been brave enough to go back down into the darkness to show the others what they learned.

I hope one day to be counted among the ranks of these teachers. They shaped me into the teacher I have become. I admit I had no altruistic motives about helping others when I started my college teaching career. I only wanted to be a part of what is really a distant, persistent lineage that, yes, stretches back to Plato and Jesus, through my own teachers, and includes the fine colleagues with whom I now share a noble profession. I loved being in the company of ideas and the people who had them. To me, my teachers were like keepers of ancient mysteries, transforming secrets. I wanted what they had.



My first 10 years as a professor have been an apprenticeship in mastering a simple truth: Our treasure really is found where our hearts lead us, and once we find ourselves there we can't help but share our discovery with others. I have no background in educational theory, no academic understanding of classroom management, a limited conception of learning behaviors, and I bristle at the sound of pedagogy, which to me sounds like some ravenous creature lurking under the desk. Yet like St. Paul, I believe "though I speak with the tongues of angels, and have not love, I am nothing."

Thus I return to my poor student, who in earnest misread the King's English and lost four points on a literature midterm one crisp fall morning. What does it say about me that I remember her? Am I like Roethke's teacher, "neither father nor lover," who wanted to reach his lost student yet had "no rights in the matter"?¹ I think I remember her, with affectionate amusement, as one of Plato's prisoners, who after a long term in the darkness deserved the blessing of the light; who struggled from its hold, squinted into the sun, stumbled, and kept moving. I hope that's what happened, at least. I'd like to imagine her as part of a procession, a long parade of all my students, those gone away and those yet to come. I'd like to believe they knew the appreciation I had for them, that I wanted them to be better than they were; I'd like to know that though most of their names have been forgotten, they all come together as part of one great blessing bestowed upon me.

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Are these thoughts mere flights of fancy, over-the-top musings of a four/four assistant professor at a fairly ordinary state university? I don't think so. This philosophy sustains me in committee meetings. It lifts me up when half my class skips school to lay in the sunshine. It has motivated me through hundreds of horrid essays, and many other mistakes on exams. It leads me continually to the next anticipated moment, when a hand goes up, a question is raised, the eyes look toward me, and I say—in quiet excitement, with the love that only a teacher can know—"Yes?"

William Faulkner, in describing the South, expressed a wisdom that I think applies as well to the craft of teaching: "You don't love because, you love despite; not for the virtues, but despite the faults."² This is the attitude I try to have toward teaching, my chosen vocation. I say vocation in

the spiritual sense, for like the Benedictine monks who chose *Ora et Labora*—Pray and Work—for their creed, my teaching means little if it does not involve the spirit as well as the mind.

Whatever my students learn or don't learn in my classes, I hope they leave with some sense of being the better for the experience. I hope they know that they've been touched by the truth. Like Faulkner, I have to continually remind myself that though my students might not always listen, though they might not always be prepared, though their lack of refinement may frustrate me, their shortcomings—and their occasional triumphs—enrich and inform my own experience.

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Those of us called to teach at the college level today find ourselves in an intellectual climate far different than any other moment in the history of American academia. Our students bring with them an alarming pragmatism, an irritating sense of entitlement, and a frightening lack of respect for academic culture and tra-

dition. They are more likely to see themselves as customers than students. But they can't help it; they've been held in the cave, in the darkness. It is our responsibility, however difficult, to usher them into the light. Unless we do this, unless we approach them with respect and love, we risk falling back into the darkness ourselves.

As I conclude this essay, it's late on an autumn Friday afternoon, perhaps the quietest moment on any college campus. I'm in my office, in the library, certainly the stillest spot at Kennesaw this day. Behind me, through my office blinds, are the stacks, row upon row of books I have not read, containing ideas I do not know. My academic degrees framed on the wall seem small and insignificant against these long corridors of knowledge. The library keeps me humble, and it seems inviting. If I can get the stack of exams on my desk graded, if I can return the last phone call of the week, maybe I'll go find a book. I might pick up something I've never read. It might offer me new insight, new vision. I might find something that transforms this dreary day. And *Lo*, I will share it, come Monday, with my students. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Theodore Roethke, "Elegy for Jane: My Student, Thrown by a Horse," in *Literature*, 2d Edition., ed. James H. Pickering and Jeffrey D. Hoepfer (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 912.
- ² William Faulkner, "Mississippi," in *A Modern Southern Reader*, ed. Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway, S.J. (Atlanta: Peachtree, 1986), 481-499.

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