

Luther Tillman and A Walk Through Teaching

By Ronda Beaman

I had seen him walking through the neighborhood many times. He was always hunched over, covered from head to toe, gloves, hat, huge sunglasses. His gait was slow and labored. Head down, he looked only at the pavement and never said hello to the those who would pass.

Every morning, as I prepared for my run, I thought of this old man and while I admired his effort, I unconsciously celebrated my youth and obvious physical superiority ...

I started teaching in a hurry. I had to prove what I knew, impress my colleagues who shared my track, and dazzle my students with fancy footwork.

Teaching wasn't really much more than an opportunity to celebrate my advanced degree in front of a captive audience that couldn't keep up. I found my students to be earnest, polite, but plodding. I urged them to pick up their pace,

follow me, catch up, try harder. While I occasionally admired their efforts, they were just too slow for me.

One morning run, I rounded the corner from a very steep hill and saw, way ahead of me and up the street, the unmistakable cadence of the little old man. Tunes were blasting from my Walkman, the morning warm and glorious, my own cadence fast and rigorous ... I knew I would be passing him.

After teaching for three years, I was left breathless one day when I met a former student from not so long ago who didn't remember my name. I didn't remember her name, either.

How could we have spent so much time together—covered so much content—and now not even “know” each other? I had assumed teaching was content, I had forgotten about connect, and by not connecting I had been forgotten.

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I realized that a teacher can easily pass students, and pass them by. My own vision of my power and ability were keeping me from truly seeing students, or having them see me.

Have you ever noticed what students do if the teacher asks the class a question? They put their heads down, look at their desks, at the floor, at anything but the teacher. It finally dawned on me that this response was born of fear.

The teacher knew the answer, the race was rigged. I began to understand that inspiration, motivation, and the passion to learn were based on more than the facts: Students needed to be seen, recognized, valued. They needed to become partners, not competitors. Rather than making my students catch up, I could slow down.

As I descended the hill, I considered my options. One, cross the street and avoid him altogether. Two, keep my own head down and pass him on the right. Three, turn down the Walkman and say 'Good Morning.'

'Hello!' I chirped from behind and startled him into a slight jump. He turned my way, keeping his head down. I couldn't see his eyes through the sunglasses, but I saw the rest of his face had been disfigured by skin cancer.

I have suffered from the same condition. I felt immediately connected to him. No wonder he was covered from head to toe. 'How courageous he must be to come out and do this,' I thought. 'How solitary his effort.' I slowed to his pace and began to walk with him.

Now, with a few years of teaching under my belt, I think of a classroom as a mistake-making place. I come into the lives of my students unannounced and uninvited and spend a semester trying to make a space to learn.

Knowing that we are all scarred by life, all of us part of the walking wounded, I bring skills and knowledge as an offering of potential, a way to heal.

I interrupt their private fear and try to give them reason to lift their eyes and see what could be. I consider my self not only a professor of education, but also a relentless architect of the possibilities of human beings.

A teacher learns, too. Learns not to walk ahead in pride, or stay behind in a false act of humility, but step by step, semester after semester, learns to walk beside the student as a guide and ally in confronting the new, the challenging, the possible.

Even though I teach a class

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with 350 students, I now learn all of their names. I ask them to write me letters from “home” to let me know what’s going on with them, I have groups over to make cookies, hike in the woods, or watch movies.

I bring my life into the classroom and invite them to bring theirs, I give my “self” as an example of how they can share their own selves.

I understand I’m a role model. If I take chances with them and make mistakes, if I remember and demonstrate the gifts that come with life and learning, if I use my time and wit to allow free human dialogue and promote wandering where the agility of the mind may go, then I begin to come close to earning the honor of being called teacher.

‘I see you walking all the time, you must really enjoy it,’ I said, breaking the awkward silence. ‘Yes, I walk twice a day, nothing much else to do now,’ he replied. ‘My name is Ronda,’ I reached out to shake his gloved hand. ‘Luther Tillman, I live right up this road, moved here after I retired last year ... lost my wife’ ... After a respectful pause, we talked about his hometown, his favorite walking shoe, and why I walk with those contraptions in my ears. Up ahead, the road forked and I was planning to turn ...

My run, jog, and now walk through teaching has taught me these lessons from the road:

Get To Know Who You Are Teaching. There is a reason that first-class, big-screen television, educational videos, and high speed computers have not replaced the live, human, feeling, touching, breathing, average teacher.

In this world of high tech, low touch, a student should feel assured that a teacher has the compassion to understand failure, the enthusiasm to promote trying, the intelligence to support effort, and the understanding of when to step back. Each of us, student and teacher, are connected, sharing the same place and time in our lives.

Each semester, after a month has passed, I give students my home address and ask them to write me a letter, tell me how they’re doing, what their other classes are like, what’s going on in their lives, anything they feel comfortable sharing with me.

I cannot give justice to the interchange that generally happens: tales of love, hatred, fear, concern, confusion, and acts of great compassion and courage. But I can testify to their potence, their genuineness, and their value in helping me know and understand my students in another dimension of life, one that is often unexplored

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and undiscovered within the confines of a classroom, or even a faculty office.

I send a letter back to each student, and it connects all of us, creating an intimate atmosphere that intensifies learning, signed, sealed, and delivered.

If God is in the details, then teaching is in the minutia. Issues and ideas in the classroom can be intimidating, grand, even herculean, but it is in the subtlety of a facial expression, the momentary comment from the student who disagrees, or the anonymous folded note under your office door that the greatest lessons of learning and teaching can be found and profound.

Notice what is going on, listen to the unsaid, leave time for silence, let everyone catch their breath before starting the next lap. Keep your office door, and your heart, open.

I use a ragged brown box placed at the back of the room that serves as our “Question, Commentary, Ideas and Suggestions” box. I urge students to use the box to communicate with me. Small, but eternal, gems often come from this tattered container, including a student note reminding me of what I might have forgotten to say, contributions of a story or poem that give a better example of a concept than the one I

used, and even the occasional heartfelt tale of how the class has helped a student go forward in life.

Small, crumpled paper with big messages that help me remember how what I’m doing affects my students and their ability to listen and learn.

Be the first one in the classroom and the last one to leave. Set the standard for being courteous, compassionate, and caring. Ask students about movies, books, families. Bring music into the classroom and play it as part of the lesson.

I am known throughout campus as the professor who brings a huge boombox to each class and asks students to provide music with a message germane to our current topic.

Often, class starts with a CD playing modern musical and poetic tributes to youth or the power of an idea. The music energizes the whole lesson and pulls us together as a learning community.

I don’t hesitate to ask local businesses to sponsor one class per semester, and they in turn happily provide movie tickets, copies of magazines, or even an occasional pizza or ice cream to remind students they do not live by books alone. This activity reminds the students that there is an entire village invested in their success.

I initiate test discussion groups at my home to demonstrate the power of group learning. I also do

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every assignment I ask my students to do. I then share my efforts the day they turn theirs in. They critique, we laugh, I ask for a group consensus on my “grade,” and we realize all over again, we’re in this together.

I reach out, I innovate, I fail, I try again, I fail better, all for my students to see and share. When it’s their turn, they are more likely to create and innovate rather than imitate. Assignments are interesting to assess, discussions more lively, students more interested in the process rather than the outcome.

If you keep doing what you’ve always done, you’ll get what you have always gotten! I teach 350 students each semester, and I am teaching pre-education majors, students who hope to be teachers. All 350 of them in one large lecture hall, that is pretty risky itself!

But I tell them I will know each of their names by the following week of class, or I buy pizza for everyone! I videotape them saying their names on their way out the door, and I watch that videotape eight times a day, until I know their names and faces in my sleep.

This takes time, this takes patience, this takes guts! But students are so shocked when you come in and start calling everyone by name, so delighted that you know who they are, so impressed

by your dedication that the rest of the semester is yours to blow!

In addition, I have designed 30 different class committees and each of the 350 students must sign up for one.

We have class greeters who get to know an entire row of students, meet and greet them when they arrive, call them when they’re absent. We have a class band that plays live music once a week while students are entering. The class chorus sings a song about education once a month. Class notetakers post lecture notes on our Web page, which is prepared by the class technology committee, and on and on.

All this activity takes time to organize and manage. There’s always the risk that the lecture hall will become a madhouse, but watching each class member take responsibility, seeing the product of each committee, and sharing the outcome of the class with the students who are in it, is well worth the gamble.

I believe it’s not the risks you take in life that bring you sorrow, it’s the memory of the risks you didn’t take that become inconsolable. The same is true in teaching, when you look back at what you accomplished, the highlights will be in your moments of daring.

If you don’t respect students, you can’t teach them. Respect their youth and ignorance. If they didn’t

It's my job to create an atmosphere of learning and challenge, to create a place the students want to be.

have both, they wouldn't need you! Respect their capabilities and skills. Respect their silence and their questioning. Respect them when they may not respect themselves. Give them chances to earn more of your respect.

I don't take roll, I tell them it's my job to create an atmosphere of learning and challenge, and experiment, to create a place they want to be. The rest is up to them.

"If you don't want to be here," I say. "We don't need you, you'll only slow us down."

My students are captains of their own destinies, responsible for their own learning. I respect them enough to believe they will make the right choices. We come to respect each other—after all, I must earn their respect—and we learn together.

Free dialogue and wandering where the agility of the mind allows should be the hallmark of a higher education. Voicing difference of opinions, learning not to walk single file in a hallway or ask permission to speak takes time.

Believing they are independent and important takes students by surprise. Give students time and space to begin to form beliefs based on the knowledge you are sharing with them.

All of my students must spend time in some sort of educational volunteer service. I give credit for

reading children's stories at dinner time in the local soup kitchen, joining Big Brothers/Big Sisters, tutoring at local elementary schools, even donating books to Head Start schools.

Of whom much is given, much is asked. My students are reminded that college is not a right, or merely a privilege, it is a responsibility. My students, all students, are now up to bat. They are the ones who must heed the call to heal the world.

John Adams once said: "A teacher affects eternity, he can never know where his influence ends." Each student who enters a class ends up, for good or ill, an animated chip of that teacher's spirit.

Teaching is one of the truly immortal professions. Remember that as you prepare a lecture, choose a reading, or select an assignment. Then go back and do it again so it's for keeps. Think of students as ambassadors of your work and your life and prepare them accordingly.

Teaching is a mobius strip, an everlasting loop of learning, life, and love that should make you weep because of its import and impact.

I give a finale rather than a final. I create projects or productions that each student can participate in to remind them that in this

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class we have only just begun.

This year we will be hosting a poster session based on our classroom learning. It will be peer-evaluated and displayed throughout the building

After the finale, I ask the students to work in small groups to answer the following questions; What did I learn about myself? What did I learn about others? And what did I learn about education?

Working through those questions together and discussing the answers brings the class to closure, but doesn't put an end to learning. I give each student my business card and urge them to keep in touch, and I mean it.

At the end of the semester we face the beginning of a different phase of our relationship and new opportunities to learn from each other. We are now part of each other's lives forever.

The time had come to part ways with Luther Tillman. I said, 'I'm not as lucky as you, I only get out once a day, so I'm going the long way. I'm sure I'll see you again, take care!' He turned stiffly to hear my words. I veered off across the street and started to replace my headphones when Luther called after me ... head slightly higher than when we first met, voice slightly clearer ... 'Thanks ... thanks for

talking to me.' I slowly turned around to see him waving, the tears began welling in my eyes as I rounded the corner toward my own path.

Teaching, more than any other profession, is a "Song of Myself." It is calling upon the highest angels of your nature to be present, helpful. It is hearing the cries for learning, love, and meaning in life.

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume, you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as
good belongs to you ...
You shall not look through my eyes
either, nor take things from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter
them from your self ...
Clear and sweet is my soul, and clear
and sweet is all that is not my soul.*

—Walt Whitman, "song of myself"
from *Leaves of Grass*

There are so many people uncared for and unnoticed on this planet. So many students disregarded, tested, and moved on without so much as a nod to their needs, their hopes, fears, and dreams. Teachers are the ones who choose to slow down, reach out, ask questions, to look and listen to the authentic human being inside all that covers him or her up.

You cannot teach what or who you do not know. You cannot ignore

the realization of "I am that which all other beings are." You must not enter teaching lightly or refrain from embracing its immortality.

You must develop your spirit, enlarge your soul, and celebrate

and sing your 'self' and invite students to walk along with you. Your greatest reward will lie in the often unspoken and many times unheard, "Thank you for teaching me." ■