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Classroom Practices

*The Heart of a Teacher: Making the Connection between Teaching and Inner Life*¹

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We can't teach children well if our teachers aren't well.

The Source of Good Teaching

A few years ago, I interviewed a veteran teacher from South Carolina about her work. She struck me as the embodiment of the very best teachers I've known. She spoke reverentially of the mystery and complexity of learning and how she struggled to understand the "rivers of my students' minds." She talked about herself as a quilter—as somebody who knits connections among her students, their families, and the community. At the end of the interview, she added, "One more thing. Maybe the most important thing—

Like the old saying, 'If Momma ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.' If you get a teacher in the classroom who's not happy, then look out, little children."

This bit of wisdom, offered in the homespun vernacular of the American South, has become a touchstone for how I think about efforts to mobilize for educational reform: We can't teach children well if our teachers aren't well.

It's worth lingering on the cold implications of this teacher's observation. If our teachers are unwell—worn, unhappy, or demoralized—then our children will suffer. Conversely, available, energized, and soulful teachers provide opportunities for our children to thrive because—as teachers—our moral energy matters, our idealism matters, our capacity to be fully present for students matters. In other words—who we are matters.

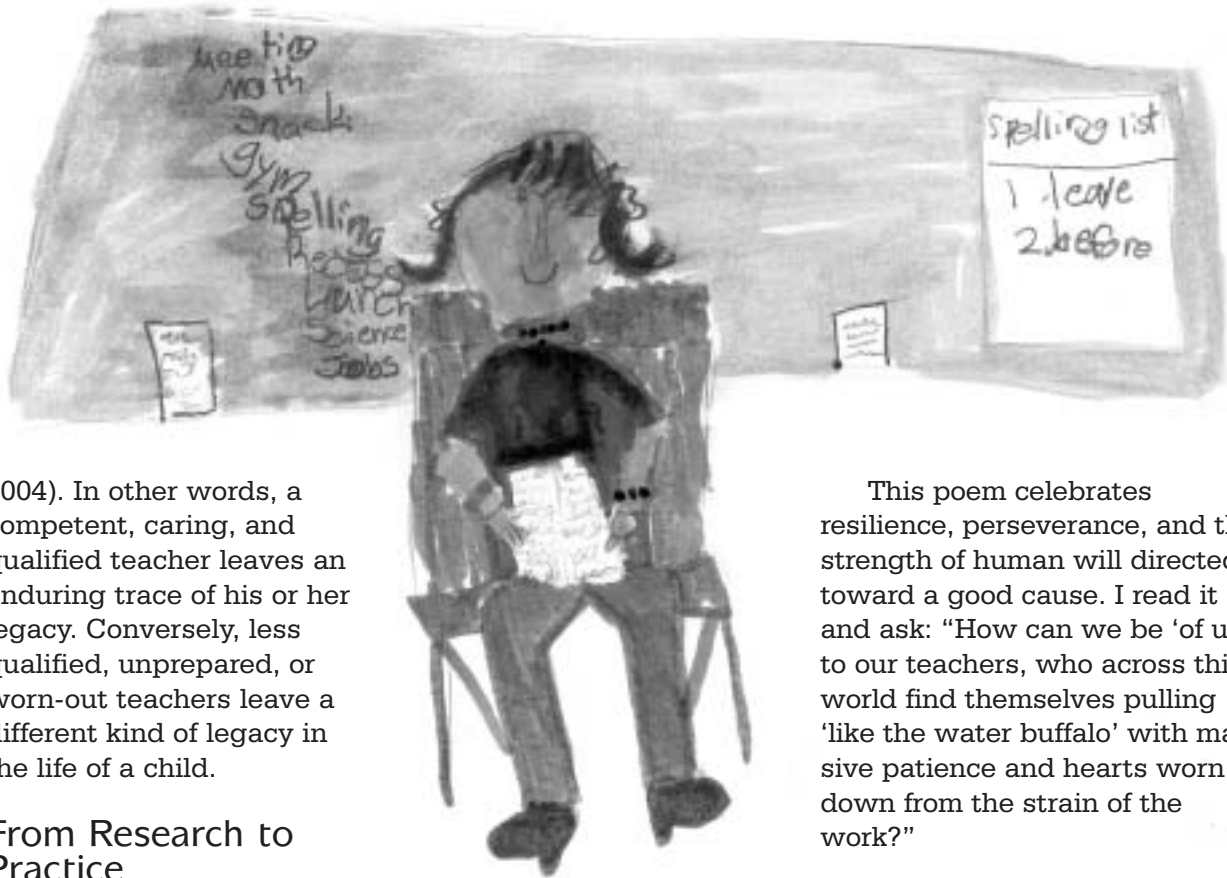
Let me frame this encounter a little more broadly: if schools, youth groups, and other educational enterprises are to be places that promote academic, social, and personal development for students, everything hinges on the presence of intelligent, passionate, caring adults

working as teachers and mentors.

Parents intuitively understand the critical importance of having a qualified, connected, and humane teacher in the classroom. Now social science researchers have explored the link between the quality and experience of a teacher and educational outcomes, and the evidence is compelling. The American Council of Education synthesizes these findings in a report, *To Touch the Future* (American Council of Education, 1999):

"The success of the student depends most of all on the quality of the teacher. We know from empirical data what our intuition has always told us: Teachers make a difference. We now know that teachers make *the* difference."

The quality of the teacher is the most important in-school factor for improving student achievement: who the teacher is matters more than what curriculum is taught or what methods are used (Nye, Konstantopoulos, and Hedges,



2004). In other words, a competent, caring, and qualified teacher leaves an enduring trace of his or her legacy. Conversely, less qualified, unprepared, or worn-out teachers leave a different kind of legacy in the life of a child.

From Research to Practice

The upshot of this important research turns us toward asking: What can we do to ensure that our teachers continue to develop their skills and deepen their understandings about teaching? Likewise, what can we do to heed the insight of the teacher from South Carolina who understood that a teacher's emotional and spiritual wellness is a critical element of good practice? And how do we design programs that recognize that a critical dimension of quality teaching involves the condition of a teacher's inner and emotional life?

When I think about these questions, I find myself drawn to the words and imagery in Marge Piercy's poem "To be of use" (Piercy, 1982). She writes:

The people I love the best
 jump into work head first
 without dallying in the shallows
 and swim off with such sure strokes
 almost out of sight...
 I love people who harness themselves,
 an ox to a heavy cart,
 who pull like the water buffalo,
 with massive patience,
 who strain in the mud and muck to move
 things forward,
 who do what has to be done,
 again and again.

This poem celebrates resilience, perseverance, and the strength of human will directed toward a good cause. I read it and ask: "How can we be 'of use' to our teachers, who across this world find themselves pulling 'like the water buffalo' with massive patience and hearts worn down from the strain of the work?"

Pathways to Professional Development

As a researcher who studies the forms of professional development available to teachers, I have come to believe that there are at least four ways that we organize opportunities for teachers to learn and grow. I will briefly consider the first three, but focus on "the way of heart" or "the way of the inner life."

The way of the subject: Familiar to all of us who work on improving teachers' practice is professional development focused on expanding a teacher's understanding of content and subject matter. Exploration of key concepts and principles at the core of a subject is necessary if teachers are to advance student learning. Done well, teachers learn not only about key ideas within the subject area, but strategies for bringing these ideas to students in developmentally appropriate ways.

The way of the method: A second critical approach is to support the growth and refinement of our methods. Our focus on expanding teachers' practices and refining their techniques seeks to augment their instructional capacity. Professional development organized in this way introduces teachers to systems of instruction such as

cooperative learning, reciprocal teaching, or other similar approaches.

The way of understanding students: A third approach to working with teachers asks, who are our students and how do we develop more complex and appreciative ways of understanding how they think and live? Our focus is to introduce teachers to cutting-edge findings in learning theory and child development.

Obviously, there is no single way forward. Teachers need a combination of professional development experiences to continue to grow and develop. The first three approaches can be understood to focus on questions

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integral to the teaching and learning process: What do I teach? How do I teach? Whom do I teach? I would like to now consider what I call a fourth way "to be of use" to teachers.

This way forward is inspired by the South Carolina teacher's observation: "We can't teach children well if our teachers aren't well." It is reflected in comments of Denis

Sparks, Executive Director of the National Staff Development Council, who contends that "teachers' vitality and engagement in their work improves school performance." It is grounded in Parker J. Palmer's best-selling book *The Courage to Teach*, where he argues that if we're serious about improving schools then we must address the heart and soul of a teacher. As Palmer reminds us, "In our rush to reform education, we have forgotten a simple truth: reform will never be achieved by renewing appropriations, restructuring schools, rewriting curricula, and revising texts if we continue to demean and dishearten the resource called the teacher on whom so much depends. Teachers must be better compensated, freed from bureaucratic harassment, given a role in academic governance and provided with the best possible methods and materials. But none of that will transform education if we fail to cherish—and challenge—the human heart that is the source of good teaching" (Palmer, 1998).

The way of the heart: The way of the heart means that even as we work with teachers on deepening their content knowledge, expanding their methods, understanding their students, and probing their sense of purpose, we strive to "cherish—and challenge—the human heart that is the source of good teaching."

A Teacher's Heart

The heart of the teacher bespeaks of mystery and ineffability; it hints of romanticism and connotes hard-to-codify qualities and elusive constructs such as emotion, intuition, and passion. As a researcher, I know it is my duty to try and pin down a definition of what I mean when I say "a teacher's heart," but I move to this task with utter humility knowing that no word or concept in the gallery of language and human thought has garnered as much attention as the idea of "heart." For example, the *Oxford English Dictionary* offers 56 distinctions of heart in its noun form, beginning with heart as a biological organism. While the denotation of heart interests me, the connotation is what intrigues me. Heart is implicated as the center of vital functions: the seat of life and mind, of feeling, understanding, and thought. The heart is the setting for one's innermost being and one's soul. It is the core of our human self and according to those who study the self's role, the coordinating center



for our action in the world. Thus it is not merely an ethereal concept, but a pragmatic force: it goads us to action, to make choices, and to take responsibility. It is the guide for our executive functions (Baumeister, 1998).

For a teacher, the role of the self plays out not only in those decisions and actions of everyday practice, but also in regard to larger questions of calling and mission. The Dutch researcher Fred Korthagen describes this

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place of heart as the setting for the "core qualities" of a teacher: qualities such as creativity, courage, kindness, and spirituality (Korthagen, 2004). Importantly, Andy Hargreaves reminds us that this core place, or what he calls the "emotional geography" of teaching, also includes the shadow emotions of shame, jealousy, frustration, boredom, and other dark sentiments (Hargreaves, 2001).

In short, my contention is that inspired, memorable teaching irretrievably depends on the condition of a teacher's heart. Our capacity to engage students, connect them to the subjects we teach, intervene in their lives, discern their needs, attend to their development, and cultivate constructive relationships with colleagues and parents depends on the condition of that "core place" of the teacher.

This brings me back to "the way of the heart." Most teachers enter the profession with a vision of themselves as potent agents of change in the lives and learning of their students.

Across the long stretch of a career or a school year, teachers face a steady stream of external challenges and institutional limitations that erode their idealism, energy, and purpose. There is much that teachers can do to support themselves and many initiatives that can be developed by educational leaders committed to deepening the adult community at their school site in an effort to renew the vitality of their teachers. One formal professional development program explicitly devoted to

cherishing and challenging the heart of the teacher is The Courage to Teach program.

The Courage to Teach

The Courage to Teach is a program of retreats designed to support educators on the journey to reclaim and deepen their professional identity and vocational integrity. It focuses on bringing teachers and educational leaders together into supportive communities to explore their teachers' hearts and examine how their inner lives play out in their work as teachers. Each group consists of 20 to 30 educators who gather for three-day retreats over a one- or two-year period. In large-group, small-group, and solitary settings, "the heart of a teacher" is explored, making use of personal stories, reflections on classroom practice, and insights from poets, storytellers, and various wisdom traditions. The intent of the retreat activities is to support teachers on a journey to reclaim their passion for teaching and find the balance so critical for sustaining their work.

The program operates under the premise that teachers choose the vocation for reasons of the heart, because they care deeply about their students and about their subject. But the demands of teaching cause too many educators to lose heart. The personal and communal process of the retreats seeks to create quiet and disciplined spaces, often called circles of trust, where teachers can hear their own inner voices and begin to claim what it will take for them to do their work with integrity and



wholeness. Let me give a short taste of what these programs look like in practice:

Twenty-five teachers and administrators sit in a circle, giving their full attention as an elementary teacher speaks passionately, and poignantly, about her love for her students and her commitment to reach each and every one of them. She goes on to tearfully describe the personal toll this is taking on her own life—creeping guilt at not having enough time or emotional energy to give to her own family, bone-deep exhaustion, nonstop worrying about the safety of some of her students, the weariness of facing an always burgeoning mountain of papers and projects to grade, a sense of increasing isolation from friends and colleagues because there is simply no more to give. The listeners sit quietly, respectfully, as she finishes, each reflecting on his or her own version of her story (Jackson and Jackson, 2003).

As this vignette illustrates, these professional development retreats deeply understand that “the way of the heart” matters. The

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retreats do not focus on pedagogical methods, content knowledge, or child development, but on the exploration of personal and professional beliefs. Here is one participant describing the experience:

A poem about fear led to an amazing conversation about the fear in our own lives. Very capable and accomplished professionals shared openly and honestly. People with multiple graduate degrees and years of experience and awards in their professions shared their fear of being inadequate. Their fear of failure. Their fear of letting people down. Sharing that vulnerability, in a way I still don’t completely understand, helped strengthen all of us. But somehow knowing we were all indeed quite human and quite apprehensive about being able to meet the challenge of educational leadership actually made us bold to keep on trying (Jackson and Jackson, 2005).

Ultimately, “the way of the heart” attempts to go public with an alternative

way “to be of use” to teachers. It contends that our greatest challenge is to sustain, motivate, and deepen a teacher’s understanding of true self. It’s an approach that believes what teachers need is not simply a refill of energy and vigor, but careful exploration of the question: How should I allocate my energy in ways that are consistent with the deepest values I have about myself as a teacher and a person? It’s an approach grounded in the simple homespun words of that South Carolinian teacher: “If you get a teacher in the classroom who’s not happy, then look out, little children.”

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¹ This article is based on a presentation at the International Step by Step Association annual meeting in Budapest, November 8–10, 2004.