

Introduction

Teaching from Within



Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.

The inner—what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.

—RAINER MARIA RILKE, “[AH, NOT TO BE CUT OFF]”

WE TEACH WHO WE ARE

I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy. When my students and I discover uncharted territory to explore, when the pathway out of a thicket opens up before us, when our experience is illumined by the lightning-life of the mind—then teaching is the finest work I know.

But at other moments, the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused—and I am so powerless to do anything about it—that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent sham. Then the enemy is everywhere: in those students from some alien planet, in that subject I thought I knew, and in the personal pathology that keeps me earning my living this way. What a fool I was to imagine that I had mastered this occult art—harder to divine than tea leaves and impossible for mortals to do even passably well!

If you are a teacher who never has bad days, or who has them but does not care, this book is not for you. This book is for teachers who have good days and bad, and whose bad days bring the suffering that comes only from something one loves. It is for teachers who refuse to harden their hearts because they love learners, learning, and the teaching life.

When you love your work that much—and many teachers do—the only way to get out of trouble is to go deeper in. We must enter, not evade, the tangles of teaching so we can understand them better and negotiate them with more grace, not only to guard our own spirits but also to serve our students well.

Those tangles have three important sources. The first two are commonplace, but the third, and most fundamental, is rarely given its due. First, the subjects we teach are as large and complex as life, so our knowledge of them is always flawed and partial. No matter how we devote ourselves to reading and research, teaching requires a command of content that always eludes our grasp. Second, the students we teach are larger than life and even more complex. To see them clearly and see them whole, and respond to them wisely in the moment, requires a fusion of Freud and Solomon that few of us achieve.

If students and subjects accounted for all the complexities of teaching, our standard ways of coping would do—keep up with our fields as best we can and learn enough techniques to stay ahead of the student psyche. But there is another reason for these complexities: we teach who we are.

Teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. As I teach, I project the condition of my soul onto my students, my subject, and our way of being together. The entanglements I experience in the classroom are often no more or less than the convolutions of my inner life. Viewed from this angle, teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.

In fact, knowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject—not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth.

The work required to “know thyself” is neither selfish nor narcissistic. Whatever self-knowledge we attain as teachers will serve our students and our scholarship well. Good teaching requires self-knowledge: it is a secret hidden in plain sight.

LANDSCAPES INNER AND OUTER

This book explores the teacher's inner life, but it also raises a question that goes beyond the solitude of the teacher's soul: How can the teacher's selfhood become a legitimate topic in education and in our public dialogues on educational reform?

Teaching and learning are critical to our individual and collective survival and to the quality of our lives. The pace of change has us snarled in complexities, confusions, and conflicts that will diminish us, or do us in, if we do not enlarge our capacity to teach and to learn. At the same time, teacher-bashing has become a popular sport. Panic-stricken by the demands of our day, we need scapegoats for the problems we cannot solve and the sins we cannot bear.

Teachers make an easy target, for they are such a common species and so powerless to strike back. We blame teachers for being unable to cure social ills that no one knows how to treat; we insist that they instantly adopt whatever “solution” has most recently been concocted by our national panacea machine; and in the process, we demoralize, even paralyze, the very teachers who could help us find our way.

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 human 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.

We are now engaged in a crucial public conversation about educational reform, but a conversation is only as good as the questions

it entertains. This book raises a question about teaching that goes unasked in our national dialogue—and often goes unasked even in the places where teachers are educated and employed. But it should be asked wherever good teaching is at stake, for it honors and challenges the teacher's heart, and it invites a deeper inquiry than our traditional questions do:

- The question we most commonly ask is the “what” question—what subjects shall we teach?
- When the conversation goes a bit deeper, we ask the “how” question—what methods and techniques are required to teach well?
- Occasionally, when it goes deeper still, we ask the “why” question—for what purpose and to what ends do we teach?
- But seldom, if ever, do we ask the “who” question—who is the self that teaches? How does the quality of my selfhood form—or deform—the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world? How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes?

I have no quarrel with the what or how or why questions—except when they are posed as the only questions worth asking. All of them can yield important insights into teaching and learning. But none of them opens up the territory I want to explore in this book: the inner landscape of the teaching self.

To chart that landscape fully, three important paths must be taken—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—and none can be ignored. Reduce teaching to intellect, and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions, and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual, and it loses its anchor to the world. Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on one another for wholeness. They are interwoven in the human self and in education at its best, and I have tried to interweave them in this book as well.

By intellectual I mean the way we think about teaching and learning—the form and content of our concepts of how people know and learn, of the nature of our students and our subjects. By emotional I mean the way we and our students feel as we teach and

learn—feelings that can either enlarge or diminish the exchange between us. By spiritual I mean the diverse ways we answer the heart's longing to be connected with the largeness of life—a longing that animates love and work, especially the work called teaching.

Rainer Maria Rilke gives voice to that longing in the poem at the head of this introduction: “Ah, not to be cut off . . .” He suggests that the spiritual quest for connectedness, rightly understood, will lead us out from the hidden heart into the vast and visible world: “The inner—what is it?/if not intensified sky,/hurled through with birds and deep/with the winds of homecoming.”

With striking imagery, Rilke offers us a mystic's map of wholeness, where inner and outer reality flow seamlessly into each other, like the ever-merging surfaces of a Möbius strip, endlessly co-creating us and the world we inhabit. Though this book is grounded in the teacher's inner terrain, it constantly segues into the outer forms of community that teaching and learning require. The inward quest for communion becomes a quest for outward relationship: at home in our own souls, we become more at home with each other.

My concern for the inner landscape of teaching may seem indulgent, even irrelevant, at a time when many teachers are struggling simply to survive. Wouldn't it be more practical, I am sometimes asked, to offer tips, tricks, and techniques for staying alive in the classroom, things that ordinary teachers can use in everyday life?

The question puzzles me, because for twenty years I have made practical use of the approach taken in this book, leading workshops and retreats for educators of all sorts. I have worked with countless teachers, and many of them have confirmed my own experience: as important as methods may be, the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching—and living—becomes.

I have heard that in the training of therapists, which involves much practical technique, there is this saying: “Technique is what you use until the therapist arrives.” Good methods can help a therapist find a way into the client's dilemma, but good therapy does not begin until the real-life therapist joins with the real life of the client.

Technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives, and this book is about helping that teacher show up. Yet even if it is

true that inner work has practical outcomes for individuals, the question of practicality arises in another form: How can educational institutions support the teacher's inner life, and should they be expected to do so?

That question is worthy of a thoughtful answer, so Chapter VI is devoted to it. For the moment, I will turn the question around: How can schools educate students if they fail to support the teacher's inner life? To educate is to guide students on an inner journey toward more truthful ways of seeing and being in the world. How can schools perform their mission without encouraging the guides to scout out that inner terrain?

A SELDOM-TAKEN TRAIL

My focus on the teacher may seem passé to people who believe that education will never be reformed until we stop worrying about teaching and focus on learning instead.

I have no question that ~~students who learn, not professors who perform, is what teaching is all about. Students who learn are the focus, first, of teachers who teach.~~ Nor do I doubt that students learn in diverse and wondrous ways, including ways that bypass the teacher in the classroom and ways that require neither a classroom nor a teacher!

But I am also clear that in lecture halls, seminar rooms, field settings, labs, and even electronic classrooms—the places where most people receive most of their formal education—teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal—or keep them from learning much at all. Teaching is the intentional act of creating those conditions, and good teaching requires that we understand the inner sources of both the intent and the act.

Most of my teaching has been in colleges and programs for older adults, but in recent years I have been enriched by working with public school teachers, from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. I have learned much from my K–12 colleagues, including these two things: teachers at all levels of education have more in common than we think, and we should not be so glib about which level we call “higher.”

Kindergarten teachers often understand the craft better than those of us with Ph.D.'s, perhaps because students in the “lower” grades are like the child in “The Emperor's New Clothes.” They do not care what graduate school you attended, who chaired your dissertation committee, or how many books you have written, but they quickly sense whether you are real, and they respond accordingly. The discerning innocence of young children deepens my conviction that at every level of education, the selfhood of the teacher is key.

“Who is the self that teaches?” is the question at the heart of this book—though answering that question in print has been more challenging than I imagined. In writing and rewriting this book many times over the past five years, I have learned how tempting it is to stay with the “whats” and “hows” and “whys”: those questions are more easily answered in prose and translated into proposals for fundable programs!

But I have persisted with the “who” question because it marks a seldom-taken trail in the quest for educational reform, a trail toward the recovery of the inner resources that good teaching always requires. Real reform is so badly needed—and we have restructured education so often without reaching that distant dream—that we should be sending expeditionary parties down every trail we can find.

I have persisted for another reason closer to the bone: “Who is the self that teaches?” is the question at the heart of my own vocation. I believe it is the most fundamental question we can ask about teaching and those who teach—for the sake of learning and those who learn. By addressing it openly and honestly, alone and together, we can serve our students more faithfully, enhance our own well-being, make common cause with colleagues, and help education bring more light and life to the world.