Part One

Turning Inward

Sustaining Our Own Hearts

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Carpooling home one day a few years ago with a fellow English teacher, we heard an interview on National Public Radio with a poet who was describing her work habits. The poet, whose name I don't recall, spoke about her work as "drinking in the stillness and receiving the pulse of the land." She described sitting quietly while words and images wove themselves into slow coherence.

Playfully, my colleague asked in an NPR-esque voice, "Well, Sam, what words characterize your work habits?"

In the spirit of two men who spent their day exhorting students to bang words and language together, we reeled off a list that aptly characterized our days. As English teachers, we tried to spark interest, raise questions, provoke insight, generate momentum, facilitate conversations, introduce new material, review for upcoming exams, establish a schema for understanding and assessing the progress of our students. As teachers of adolescents, we counseled, listened, humored, disciplined, and tried to be present in their complicated lives as best we could. We also attended

meetings, called parents, photocopied materials, and marked papers.

If the poets' words were languorous, gentle, and contoured, ours were charged, careening, and jagged. The poet described her work as contemplative. We described our work as a crazy quilt of roles and tasks. If the poet strolls forth taking the world in, the teacher bustles about trying to create those high-octane connections between students, subject matter, and teacher.

The gusting and squalling conditions of the teaching life often leave us so absorbed in merely maintaining our footing on the heeling deck that it's hard to find the will and the space to turn inward. Teachers everywhere are under pressure to provide action and results: we must orchestrate class, serve our students, cover the curriculum, prepare our students to clamber over the hurdles of high-stakes tests, meet with our colleagues, and contribute to reform agendas. A principal with twenty years' experience explained the consequences of this pace:

> I'm absolutely convinced that the amount of stress and complexity that teachers confront every day does not allow them to be in a healthy way. . . . Teachers need time for themselves. They don't get that. Teachers need reflection time. They don't get that. If people aren't at a comfortable place with who they are, then they don't do a good job in the classroom.
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> The relentless giving, doing, and acting demanded by teaching derail opportunities for teachers to slow down, take time, and listen deeply to themselves. The cost of this is not just harried and fatigued teachers, but teachers whose inner vitality gets blown out.[1]

In reflecting on her life as a poet, May Sarton writes, "I, in my normal life, am alone all the time. I work alone. Therefore, when someone comes for tea and it's the only person I see all day,

that is precious too, because solitude without society would be meager and would, in the end, make for a dwindling of personality, perhaps. You can't eat yourself all day and all night. There has to be something in that brings life-food from the outside."[2]

The message for teachers is the mirror message: *We, in our normal teaching life, are mostly with and for others.* We work in crowded classrooms, amid throngs of students, in an environment that demands total emotional and cognitive presence as we make upward of eight thousand decisions in the course of a day. The pace of our work is feverish and becoming more accelerated and fragmented. A small play on Sarton's words tolls loudly here: *Society and action without solitude would be meager and in the end make for a dwindling personality, perhaps. You can't eat with others and for others all day and all night. There has to be something that brings life-food from the inside.*

Teachers need nourishment from the *inside.* In my experience as a teacher, administrator, and researcher, I have heard teachers give voice to their visceral need to speak and be heard regarding questions of vocation and purpose. When we're deprived of the opportunity to talk, think, and muse about the deeper meanings in our work, it's easy to lose sight of what called us to teaching. The questions at the center of Part One are the meaty questions that come when teachers turn inward: What is my way as a teacher? How can I sustain my ideals in this work? What are the consistent sources that give me energy? How can I cleave away the excess to leave myself focused on the truly important? And as Parker Palmer likes to call it, the close-to-the-bone question: Who is the self that teaches?

One elementary teacher explained to me what happened when she took time to turn inward and reflect on her life as a teacher: "It was life-altering to . . . step outside the frenetic pace of your life. To sit down beside the road and be contemplative. It gives you time to consider how to be in this world and how to be with your students. It offers an opportunity to kindle or rekindle

the sense of mystery and wonder about life and the precious lives of each student."

Turning inward has nothing to do with meeting the standards, improving teaching, and staunching the dire attrition rate of teachers—but as you'll learn in the stories in Part One, it also has everything to do with it.

—S.M.I.

Notes

1. Intrator, S. M., and Scribner, M. *An Evaluation of the Courage to Teach Program.* Kalamazoo, Mich.: Fetzer Institute, 1998, p. 18.
2. Schade, E. R. (ed.). *From May Sarton's Well: Writings of May Sarton.* Watsonville, Calif.: Papier-Mache Press, 1994, p. 34.

The daily challenges of the classroom can grind teachers down, leaving our initial ideals and hopes for teaching smoldering and distant embers. Amy Symons, a high school teacher from the San Francisco Bay Area, feels overrun by late, unmotivated students and bureaucratic incursions that deplete her spirit and erode her morale. Though exhausted and close to her wit's end, Symons reframes her disillusionment and resentment and speaks to her students from the heart. While successful on this day, Symons, like so many of us, wonders where to get the strength to continue to work in an environment that often leaves her with feelings of "frustration, heartbreak, and anger."

—S.M.I.

Speaking from the Heart

Amy Symons

My enthusiasm for the lesson plan I've been conceiving of since the summer dissipates as I sling on my backpack and slog my way through bodies in the lunchtime crush. I sign in to school and sigh. I knew I hadn't left enough time to get to my second-floor classroom before the bell rang. Despite the fact that I am six or more inches taller than most students, which affords me a good view of how to maneuver between yelling girls, strutting young men, cowering frightened freshman, I still feel squashed and disrespected as an adult and as a teacher at this school.

I finally find my way through the last hallway to my shared room, where my colleague is conducting a student meeting. Although my fellow teacher tries to protect my preparation time in our classroom, an increasing number of students spend time here for legitimate but annoying reasons all the same. The first bell rings, and about a third of my class trickles in on time. I deliver my daily mantra to write down the homework assignment in their study planners as I take

roll. *Is there any point to filling out the attendance sheet? So many of these absent students will turn out to be tardy.* I stand and begin to explain the homework. The phone rings. Two more students arrive, laughing and seemingly oblivious to the fact that they are now in class. On the phone, I talk to an anxious mother who works downstairs, checking to see if her daughter's in class. I tell her no.

"Have you seen her? Do you know where she is?"

"No, sorry, she's not here." *Why is she so surprised at her daughter's absence? She's started to skip more and more of her classes. Why doesn't this mother call either before or after class? She knows I'm teaching.*

I return to the chalkboard to continue explaining the homework and notice how jumpy and unfocused the students are. I tell them I need their attention. As soon as I start speaking, I'm interrupted. I stop and wait. "Focus," I exhort, with a smile. Stretching my arms wide, I slowly point my index finger into the other palm. "Focus!" I start again, and now other students from the other side of the room begin to talk. I shush them and the phone rings again. This time I'm greeted with a rush of demands and breathless questions.

"Amy, this is Georgia Kahn, the special ed teacher. Is Shaquila Dimond there? How is she today? And you know I need to know what your homework is every day, and you haven't given it to me yet. What exactly *are* you doing in class? You need to let me know ahead of time because these students legally have a modified program and you need to remember that when you grade them this marking period."

"Yes. Georgia, hi." *Even though I've told her not to, this woman always calls in the middle of class expecting to have a full conversation. Why?*

"When can you do this? We need to meet. You *must* remember about these students!"

Take a deep breath. Breathe deeply. I listen to my students raise their voices and spin off into more lunchtime behavior.

"Georgia, I'd love to talk to you about this, but I'm in the middle of class. I'll put the homework in your box. OK? 'Bye."

"Great, great, but—"

I hang up. I sigh and return to the easel where the ideas the class generated yesterday are listed. As I begin to speak, after calling for attention again, three more girls walk in. The class's attention shifts away from me to them as they sign in the tardy book. The girls continue their conversation, making no effort to modify their voices or behavior.

"Girls! Why are you late?"

Silence.

"When you come in late, it affects me—I lose my train of thought; it affects everyone else here; and most important of all, it affects you. Come in, be quiet, and sit down."

They shuffle to their seats. One waits a moment and then starts talking to her tablemate as I ask for the class's attention for what feels like the fiftieth time. *That does it! What should I do? Cry? I sure feel like it. Yell more? Not a great solution. Be honest about how hard this is for me?* I notice the special education aide—an adult—has just arrived, fifteen minutes late. I lower my voice and start speaking quietly. The side conversations fade away after the first sentence or so.

"Do you guys know why I'm here? Why I stand up here every day? (*Pause.*) I do this . . ." *(I can't believe I'm doing this)* "out of *love.*"

Guffaws. Twitters from both sides of the room.

"I do this out of love—for you. I feel like you deserve more out of school and out of your lives than you may have received in the past."

Their cynicism radiates.

"I do this out of love—for education. I love what education can do for you and where it can take you. Most of you say you want to go to college. I want to help you achieve your goal."

I'm getting more eye contact, especially from the girls.

"I do this out of love, because I love teaching," *Is this true? I'm not so sure anymore.*

"I love what I do—I love reading and hanging out with you guys and helping you learn."

Everybody's quiet.

"But I don't love how much time of *your* education we're wasting and how long it takes for us to get on track. This is your life, your trajectory toward college, and I want to help you. But *you've* got to help, too.

"So let's try this again. *Please,* if you're not ready to listen now, fifteen minutes into class, please let me know. You can leave class with my permission. But we've got to move on so we can wrap up this idea we've been working on for several days. Are you ready?"

Wait.

"OK . . ."

I begin my spiel on health, prompting the students with questions about how mental, physical, and social health are interrelated. For the next span of time, they're participating and engaged. As I check in with different groups, I wonder if there's a correlation between my approach today and their engagement; I want to believe there is.

Speaking from my heart is one of the reasons why I teach. I like speaking truthfully and working alongside students to make sense of our world, our literature, our lives. I am not a great authoritarian; I wonder if my shortcomings in that area will keep me from feeling successful and confident in this school setting, where the teachers who bark seem to have few to no management problems. Yet when I yell, my voice breaks, and I feel like my students see my sham for what it is: not me.

I took the risk of being myself that day, and the room felt different—maybe not only for me but for them, too. I was aware of the strength it took for me to reframe feelings of frustration, heartbreak, anger, and resentment and give them a positive spin, forming them into a "teacher speech" that wouldn't further alienate the

kids. I wonder how they perceive me. I'm beginning to realize how skeptical they are of me—a white, young, new teacher with untraditional curricula who attempts, and frequently fails, to push them to think and conceive of English in different ways. I don't hand out worksheets; I don't assign book reports; I don't yet give vocabulary lists. I'm new to them and therefore a new teacher. That's a hard role for me to swallow again, as this is the fourth school I've been new at.

I started the year with excitement, confidence, and lots of ideas. But I find that the encounters I have in my classroom often feel like battles, and I'm the one who ends up with the most bruises and lost lifeblood. I am proud of myself for taking the risk of speaking from my heart that day, but I feel so misunderstood and disrespected that I only want to further protect myself and barricade that self who desires to teach.

Since 1994, Amy Symons has taught English and humanities courses in a broad array of school contexts. She began her career teaching seventh-grade language arts and social studies at the Keys School in Palo Alto, California, and then proceeded to teach at the St. Paul's Episcopal School and the Oakland Technical High School in Oakland, California, before coming to her present position at Hayward High School in Hayward, California. She writes that she feels most alive in her teaching "when there's a feeling in the room that we've come upon something that is *real,* something that transcends the classroom and is about life. I love discovering new analogies or ways to translate information that kids get and can really ingest."

There comes a time when we find ourselves in the crosshairs of a parent's wrath or on the receiving end of a student's fury. No matter how confident we are in ourselves as teachers, these moments unsettle us and bow our spirit. High school English teacher Jim Burke describes receiving an angry letter from a student. While the letter bites deep, he does not turn away but works hard to hear the student's voice as an invitation to be the teacher he feels called to be.

—S.M.I.

This Is Where Teaching Gets Real

Jim Burke

Teaching is so public, so personal, so dangerous. You walk in each day, to each class, to begin that unit, that lesson, that activity as if for the first time because you have never taught that lesson to that class or this kid.

You can, of course, stand on the hill looking back over the years of teaching that brought you to this moment. You can recall the long, proud tradition of which you are now a part and to which you feel a serious obligation. You can reflect until your eyes themselves resemble two burnished mirrors and your hands are filled with all you could ever know. You might even, as I have, become more public by writing about what you do, how you do it, offering to both teachers and the public your own insights into the complexity of learning. You might even, as I did tonight, speak on behalf of a former student at his Eagle Scout ceremony in a church filled with many of the students you taught and their parents, most of whom come up to you afterward to thank you for your teaching.

None of this, however, will prepare you for the messages such as the e-mail I found waiting for me after the ceremony.

> Dear Jim,
>
> I have decided to call u Jim b/c i do not feel inferior to you, in fact if anything you are inferior to me. Anyways, since I am leaving Burlingame High School next year to attend a school with better english teachers than you since you just plain suck at teaching, i would like to tell you that the one year i had you for a teacher was the worst experience in my time at school. You have no idea how to teach. instead you ramble on about how your new book is coming out. Too bad your book sucks and proabably nobody bought your book because your techniques were pulled out of your ass. From students i talked to that had you this year and last also have made remarks about your poor preformance of the year and at times you are aloof during class. I agree with that but also think that you are an arrogant bastard who needs to give up teaching. I feel sorry for your kids because they will grow up with a father who holds expectations way to high to meet.
>
> I wish you the worst luck in all that you fail in. Enjoy the rest of your life.
>
> Sarcastically,
>
> The student you screwd over and tried to keep out of sophomore honors english.

I could dismiss this letter, which contains just enough information to tell me who probably wrote it. I could ignore it, write it off, and turn my ear toward the songs of praise my former students and parents offered only hours before. But are we in this only for the people who like us, who take whatever we offer—however brilliant or banal the assignment is—and make us look good? Is the measure of our success the obvious success of our students as measured by their scores, grades, awards, or the testimonials we receive?

This is where courage comes in, for it would be so much more comfortable to hit the delete key and simply erase the e-mail and all its anger. But this kid is extending to me an invitation, one I need to take if I am to be the teacher I want to be. This is where teaching gets real.

I don't need to play the martyr to this boy's misplaced anger. I am that boy, or was, when I was his age. It is the greatest irony that I grew up to become the teacher of such students as I was.

The poet William Stafford wrote a poem called "Vocation," which ends with a line I keep with me at all times:

> Now both of my parents, the long line through the plain,
> the meadowlarks, the sky, the world's whole dream
> remain, and I hear him say while I stand between the two,
> helpless, both of them part of me:
> Your job is to find what the world is trying to be.[1]

This kid does not know who or what he is trying to be yet. And one of my many jobs was—and is—to figure out what kind of teacher each student needs me to be for him.

It's July now, midway through the summer I need so I can return in September and be the teacher to others that I was not to that disgruntled young man.

It will take courage. My own adolescent eyes will be watching me, wanting to know what I am doing today to help me find my way to what I want to be tomorrow. I will need to be my own teacher. This does not let me off easy but makes me do the work I must—to be the teacher I am and always try to be.

Note

1. Stafford, W. *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems.* St. Paul, Minn.: Graywolf Press, 1998, pp. 102–103.

Jim Burke is a full-time high school English teacher, the moderator of a dynamic on-line discussion list called CATENET (California Teachers of English Network), the author of seven impressive books on teaching, and the designer of an award-winning Web site on teaching (www.englishcompanion.com). Two of his most popular books are *The English Teacher's Companion: A Complete Guide to Classroom, Curriculum, and the Profession* (Boynton-Cook, 1999) and *I Hear America Reading: Why We Read What We Read* (Heinemann, 1999). His latest book is *Illuminating Texts: How to Teach Students to Read the World* (Heinemann, 2001). He began teaching special education students in Tunisia while he was in the Peace Corp. Upon his return, he taught English in Northern California, first at Castro Valley High School and now at Burlingame High School. He has won several awards for his outstanding work with children in the classroom and other awards for his service and scholarship to the profession, including the Intellectual Freedom Award presented by the National Council of Teachers of English in 1999, and in 2001 he was given the prestigious Hall of Fame award by the California Reading Association. In his classroom, he feels most alive "when working with kids who want to succeed but do not know that they can or do not know how. I feel like I am helping them gain access to another self and choices they did not think were theirs."

Many of us become teachers for reasons of the heart, called to the classroom by a desire to serve society and connect with children. Our belief in the importance of our mission often fuels expectations that society will value our work and contribute the resources necessary for us to be successful with children. The reality is often the opposite, and many of us lose heart and hope. We become bitter and disillusioned and feel victimized by the system. Thirty-year veteran John Rockne begins his career enthralled by teaching, but his initial enthusiasm is ground down, and he experiences a fallow period that lasts for decades. Rockne shares how, through stories and imagination, he is able to forgive his and the school system's flawed realities and become genuinely present and engaged in the search for "expressions of earnest sincerity from students."

—S.M.I.

Teaching Had Become an Ordinary Job

John Rockne

The source of my calling sprang up in my college years, the late sixties. During this time of turmoil, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. But quite by chance, I got a part-time job working with young students as a tutor five days a week. The interaction with these kids affected me quickly and profoundly. On Wednesdays, I shot baskets with Mark and then helped him do penmanship. He was a fourth-grade boy who had broken both arms. After they mended, he had forgotten how to write. Helping him remember writing was satisfying. Unknown and forgotten parts of my nature were called out spontaneously in this human exchange. I changed my major to education and soon found myself in a fifth-grade classroom.

My connection to teaching was personally fulfilling. I felt I had found the work I was born to do. Daily student interaction was a continual spring that fed my intellect, intuition, and emotions. I remember a young girl at lunch asking

me shyly if I would please "open" her banana. Things like that just charmed me. My enthusiasm and energy for the work was automatic; I didn't think about it.

I did, however, think the problems of overcrowded classes, inadequate supplies, parental neglect, and low teacher pay were about to be solved. I fondly remember one of my first experiences as a member of a book adoption committee. When the salespeople made their presentations, I actually believed the one that absolutely guaranteed that "within three years" of using his company's new series, the majority of my kids would be reading at grade level. I also believed the legislature was finally going to "fully fund" basic education. The current problems of the educational system were just temporary aberrations. There was good and bad, and good was about to win.

Over time some of the grim realities of the educational system finally wore through my simple views. I remember suddenly realizing one day that none of the big problems would ever go away. These were permanent conditions. The day when even half of the class would be at "grade level" would never come. The respect and resources I expected from society would not be arriving next year. These discouraging truths entered my inner life, and I began to dread going to school. I could not remember the compelling allure that had once excited me.

In short, my feelings were hurt. I felt I was the victim of a devious sort of manipulation for which I was in no way responsible. Innocence and beauty made way for rage and resentment. Rather than go deeper into my work, I sought to involve myself less. I moved to junior high in hopes of making teaching a more clearly defined task, a strict exchange of time for money. I wanted work I could just show up for, like a job in a factory. I put teaching into a tidy compartment and managed it strategically. I planned appropriately and executed my responsibilities adequately. But I was not inspired to enthusiasm by teaching, nor were my students showing many signs of being enthusiastically inspired by my instruction.

I promised myself that as soon as my class sizes decreased and my pay increased, I would again put my heart into the work.

I busied myself with an active private life clearly separated from my work life. I found part-time jobs to make more money and investigated other career choices. A sense of wonder from work was no longer experienced or expected. *Teaching had become an ordinary job.*

Even in my sorry state, some moments in the classroom penetrated my heart. For example, Anna was a plain, poor, unpopular girl who wrote lengthy fantasy stories in my ninth-grade communication arts class. When she wrote, it was as if her ear could hear the song of creation, and she was dancing to it. Her writing was hard to follow, but she worked with dedication. The quality of her devotion touched me. This girl reminded me of the saying that even if we don't control our own fate, we do have the power to choose how it will be experienced. I wanted to give her writing, her earnest gesture of exchange with the world, some kind of personal response. But I did not know how to be present for her. I could not find the connections to my feelings and intuitions because my whole self was not showing up for work.

I reluctantly acknowledged I could not find my whole self. I had lost my true way. Part of me whispered, Be lost for a while. Just stop what you are doing and become aware of where you really are. So I consciously spent time just being in the midst of my students rather than being over them or ignoring them as I corrected papers at my desk. I found a few students like Anna, sincerely trying to become educated. But most kids were in a state of unconcerned boredom while others smoldered with a brooding anger ready to flare up if I disturbed them. "We'll behave pretty well if you don't make us work very hard" was the controlling agreement in my classroom. Had I become my own worst nightmare, the hardened veteran teacher recycling canned lessons grimly enduring until retirement? I felt foolish and embarrassed by the mediocre state of affairs in my classroom.

Feeling like the fool became my turning point. Either I would find a way to feel good about what I was doing, or I would leave this work. I spent too much time teaching for it not to furnish me with satisfaction. Then the image of the Wizard of Oz appeared in my mind. This solemnly self-righteous part of myself undergoing self-inflicted agony was the magnificent Oz. But my heart, the little fat man behind the curtain, was saying, Get over yourself, you pretentious fool. This is just junior high! I started laughing at my own self-importance.

The reason I was shut down at work was because I had simply been pouting about how unfairly the system was treating me. It seemed so trite, so commonplace, so childish. Seeing myself as childish was refreshing. It made it easier to forgive myself for being so simple. The way I approached work began to change. Laughter and forgiveness began to drain away the pool of resentment that blocked the connections to my emotions and intuitions.

Applying a literature perspective, I asked myself if pouting about a clunky system should be the main sticking point of my personal struggle. The answer was no. If I wished to play the hero in my own life story, I needed better antagonists—such as the students right in front of me. That is where my fate needed to be worked out.

Placing my own self in a story felt corny, but I was optimistic that these sentiments could truly be my guides. To feel important enough to have a destiny was something I had given up long before. Being a hero just wasn't something I could take seriously. But revisiting my notions about flawed heroes locked in epic struggles seemed the path my emotions and intuitions wished to take. I found that these ideas had seasoned and matured with time and new layers and textures in my own character were now exposed.

My sense of humor continued to find new pockets of self-importance to laugh away. I began to feel more kinship with others as I realized that my struggle was not really so unique. A willingness to risk appeared that was quite freeing. After all, if I tried new

ways of teaching and they flopped, I would be no worse off than I already was. I asked myself, What do I really want from work? The answer was simple: I wanted more expressions of earnest sincerity from students, since that is what pierced my heart in the first place.

I recalled an inscription over the door of a chapel I had been to years earlier. It read, *"Abyssus invocat abyssum."* Deep calls out to deep. Anna's call to me had reawakened my own personal sense of destiny. Simple truths hit me. For example, the reason I wasn't finding much genuine fulfillment from teaching was that I was not looking for it. For teaching to work, I needed to need it. It won't give me what I don't ask for. Could teaching save my life? That question kept me in continual suspense. It even now describes how I am when I am at my best.

Posing deep questions to my students elevated my struggle. My revised lesson plan objectives were for learners to "do compelling, meaningful, and sincere things." I am glad my supervisor didn't check those plans. The projects entailed making pictures (which was new for me), writing, and then presenting work that described the students' hopes and fears. It was messy and bewildering at first; many students "didn't get it" or thought it was "stupid" or "none of my business." It took more time than I expected, and I felt vulnerable and ridiculous. But there were a few students who took the assignments as serious invitations to express themselves. These students became the source of guidance for the rest of us.

One student, Darren, pictured the mystery of himself as a net cast into the sea. In his net were elements symbolizing important things he was catching, such as his friends, a basketball, and some CDs. Other elements had passed through, such as an old girlfriend and some cigarettes. In the deeper water ahead of the net were things such as a car, a job, and some blank faces of the important people he had yet to meet. He explained his picture, and students asked many questions in the ensuing discussion, which ended with

comments like "Is that all you have to do?" or "I've got an idea like that." Darren had inspired us.

That was in 1992, and things have been getting better ever since. Now in my introduction to a new class, with a robust enthusiasm and a straight face, I tell kids that they are stuck in the predicament of being a teenager. They are the main characters in their own life stories, and their choices are creating their destinies. With their whole lives in front of them, they do have epic dimension. If they use skill and imagination to read, write, talk, and listen, they can begin to unravel the baffling puzzle of their lives. To succeed in this adventure, they need to be brave and bold and look to each other for inspiration. I end by explaining that I, their teacher, am so old that I can't remember being a teen, so my ability to help them is limited.

To illustrate how I find a satisfying path through the confounding plight of being a public school teacher, I offer a story about another old man, much wiser than I. In act 5 of Shakespeare's *King Lear,* Lear and his daughter Cordelia are being led off to prison. She wishes to escape, but Lear says:

> No, no, no, let's away to prison.
>
> So we'll live,
>
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
>
> At gilded butterflies. . . .
>
> And take upon's the mystery of things.

Prison, song, butterflies, and mystery are images that describe my current inner landscape. Prison can be the blemished public education setting where I live and work as well as the resentment and blame it arouses in me. Committing my wholeness to this prison without reservation is a paradoxical task. I would not usually seek out the restriction and restraint of the rigid time management of a school day. I would rather experience freedom and awe like a sun-

rise on a mountaintop. Consequently, to bring my whole heart, mind, and imagination into the classroom demands that I tolerate the tension of these opposites. Going "away to prison" means accepting and forgiving the system I work in as well as my own failings and limitations. This forgiveness was the breakthrough to my feelings. To commit to the imperfect is not easy. The collective attitude that happiness is all about having perfect things still holds sway in me, and this tension causes suffering. But choosing what to suffer about changes the experience. One becomes less of a victim.

For the next image, Lear continues with "So we'll live and pray, and sing." Helen Luke interprets this as "the expression of joy in the harmony of the chaos."[1] Chaos is an apt description for at least some of my day in a junior high. Finding harmony in that chaos presents another paradox. Going even further to find joy begins to test the limits of holding the tension of the world of opposites. But I do believe there is joy and harmony if only I can hear the song.

The reference to butterflies can represent my students. A butterfly is a momentary being coming from a caterpillar. Junior high students are undergoing a metamorphosis not unlike this. They can soar like butterflies and behave like worms all in the space of a single hour. Taken further, the butterfly image can represent the "fragile yet omnipotent beauty of the present moment," as Luke later states.[2] A lot of human energy is contained in a classroom, and the company of thirty youngsters sometimes puts an "omnipotent" edge on the present. By saying, doing, and being in ways that find their origin in my heart rather than intellect, I take upon myself "the mystery of things."

The lens of paradox and story has opened my eyes to the wonder and mystery of life. I now go into the class relishing the tensions and the polarities, seeing in them the opportunities for creativity. The challenges no longer defeat or limit me but call forth my best. Teaching is no longer an ordinary job.

Notes

1. Luke, H. M. *Old Age.* New York: Parabola, 1987, p. 28.
2. Luke (1987), p. 28.

In 1973, John Rockne began teaching third and fourth grade in the Bethel School District in Spanaway, Washington. Since 1982, he has been teaching communication arts and social studies at Bethel Junior High School. He has served the children and parents of the Bethel School District for twenty-eight years. He describes that he feels most alive in his teaching when "students' comments, behavior, or work surprises me. The most lively and invigorating exchanges happen in the moments when I have to improvise."

Good teachers long accustomed to doing their work with passion and energy can sometimes experience stretches in their careers when they find themselves disconnected from their students, detached from their colleagues, and disenchanted by their work. These lulls can be deeply unsettling, particularly for those who have long believed that teaching was their life's vocation. Sixteen-year veteran Leslie Young, freshly honored as District Teacher of the Year, describes her own terrifying loss of her sense of self as a teacher. She shares how developing an inward focus, slowing down the pace and level of commitments in her life, and focusing attention on her own learning help her revitalize her commitment to teaching and refind the "grooves in which to place [her] pedagogical wheels."

—S.M.I.

An Experiment with Truth
One Teacher's Path

Leslie Young

> When you yearn for things that you cannot name and you grieve not knowing the course, be certain that you are growing as all things that grow, and rising towards your higher self.
>
> Kahlil Gibran

My shoes hit the pavement in a steady clapping rhythm, as though through my daily walk I was trying to remind myself that I was still alive. I was at the height of my teaching career: I had been named District Teacher of the Year the previous spring, followed by a prestigious state award for innovative curriculum projects, and I was well on the way to preparing my National Board Certification for Professional Teaching Standards. Yet every morning I woke up praying that the inner anguish I felt would dissipate, only to find the anxiety of emptiness growing by the minute. The meaning of life had slowly been seeping out of me for the past four months, and nothing I did seemed to bring it back. I stood in front of my thirty fifth-graders every day, going through the motions.

I was beginning to recognize that the reasons why I had gone into teaching in the first place had vanished. Although the recognition I had received was based on my dedication to think and teach "outside the box," the new rigorous state standards required my district to create a uniform course of study for our students, and expression of creativity in teachers and students was no longer a desirable commodity. Many of my other honored colleagues had moved on to more administrative roles, abandoning the work for which they were recognized in the first place. And I was about to enroll in a graduate school program for which I had no passion but felt I should go because it would "look good on my résumé." As Parker J. Palmer wrote in *The Courage to Teach*, I was "disconnected from the inner teacher,"[1] and I was about to have my own "experiment with truth." I didn't know where it would take me, and I was terrified.

> Do not wish to be anything but what you are, and try to be that perfectly.
>
> UNKNOWN

Teaching had been an unpredictable accident. I decided to follow a lifelong passion to live in France. Working at a regular job was out of the question, yet teaching English to the "natives" was in high demand in this provincial town. Suddenly, I found myself at the beginning of an eight-year overseas adventure. In facing the French students daily—children and adults in various educational settings—I found what Palmer calls the "undivided self": every thread of my own life experience was honored, and with this golden net I was able to hold my students, my subject, and myself in a glorious exchange. The hours were long and the pay was modest, but the work demanded constant creativity. The love I found personally and professionally liberated me in unforeseen ways. I lived and breathed my work; I taught not from pedagogical theory but from my gut, "from the inside out." The real teacher had arrived.

> He who has a why to live can bear with almost any how.
>
> Friedrich Nietzsche

I returned to the United States with the desire to continue to teach embedded in me. I received my teaching credential and found myself teaching elementary school children—mainly Hispanic immigrants or their sons and daughters. Again, I discovered my passion. I was teaching what I had lived: my students' frustrations with a foreign language and culture. Whereas many of my colleagues found these students "too low" or "unmotivated," I found them captivating. Their parents handed me their precious children with the implicit plea to educate them, to guide them toward a life that they, the parents, knew they could never achieve for themselves. I was a contributor to the true mission of public education. My students were determined to succeed in their adopted homeland, and I was to be the bridge. Our classroom sparkled with new projects, and I was tacitly given carte blanche by my principal to try out new ideas behind closed doors. Yes, there were some students who strayed from what I felt most of the time to be a perfectly synchronized dance. There were even those who could not keep up. Yet I was fortunate to be able to maintain this spirited existence for eight years, all the while making sure to steer clear of those who only saw teaching as a "job" and not a vocation.

> Who we are as individuals reflects who we are as teachers.
>
> Parker J. Palmer

Those were the joys of the beginning, but after eight years in France and eight in the United States, I cracked. "You've lost your balance," one set of colleagues would advise me. "You're probably just experiencing teacher burnout," another set would chime in. I was terrified that I had lost the teacher inside. Without knowing who I was anymore, I could no longer find the grooves in which to place my pedagogical wheels.

I decided to take a break, far away from all I had constructed. I withdrew my application for graduate school and instead enrolled in acting classes. I threw all my education-related books in the closet and read only what I felt like reading. I turned down district opportunities to serve on committees or present workshops and instead enrolled in an exercise program. I stopped running on the "career treadmill" with my blinders on and took a leisurely walk, enjoying the people and places I discovered on the way.

In order to teach, I realized, I had to become a learner again, but this time in a totally new arena. It took a while; but with breathing space and the permission from loved ones to do what I felt like doing, the world began to move from black and white back to subtle color. Slowly, my teaching took on a new dimension as well. As my life outside the classroom expanded, so did the one inside. The students seemed to be more motivated, and so was I. I was able to take up my crusade of "creative insubordination" with new knowledge and flair.

The moral of the story? To be a better teacher, don't be afraid to find yourself, even at the most inopportune of moments. As the sole constant in life is change, so it is in teaching. If teaching means to touch lives and at its best change lives for the better, so must you do so for yourself. Only if you learn what gives you true joy will you be able to help your students find what gives them joy.

Note

1. Palmer, P. J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.

Leslie Young began her work in education as a curriculum specialist in Vichy, France, where she developed a model program for the French Ministry of Education on English in the primary schools. In 1992, she began teaching at the Patrick Henry Elementary School in Anaheim, California. In 1999, she received her National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Certification. Aside from her classroom responsibilities, she also serves in a number of teacher leadership positions, including mentor teacher, a Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment provider for the Anaheim City School District, and instructor for the Orange County and Los Angeles departments of education. She is the author of *The Storytelling Handbook for Primary Teachers* (Penguin Books, 1991) and a recipient of the Golden Bell award for *The Immigrant Project* (California School Boards Association, 1998). She has also received a nomination for the Outstanding Educator Award by the Anaheim Chamber of Commerce and in 1998 was the Teacher of the Year in the Anaheim City School District. She says she feels most alive teaching "when I am discovering along with my students."

Many teachers are drawn to the profession by their belief that through teaching they can do great things. This heroic vision is a source of inspiration, but it can also become a source of great frustration when a teacher's efforts do not yield the triumphs pursued. Initially, Mary Alice Scott comes to teaching, like so many of us, to move mountains and transform the world. Frustrated by real impediments and overwhelming realities, she leaves the classroom. Years later, while teaching in a different context, she discovers that teaching is less about doing "great things" and more about "doing small things with great love."

—S.M.I.

Doing Small Things with Great Love

Mary Alice Scott

My high school yearbook sold advertisements each year to parents of graduating seniors to print inspirational quotes and congratulatory messages for their children. My mom bought one. She put a picture of me as a little kid, looking silly, with spaghetti on my head or something and a little note that said "congratulations"—pretty typical. But at the bottom was this quote from Mother Teresa: "We can never do great things, only small things with great love." I don't think I ever told my mom how much that affected me. I'd gone through high school determined to do great things, just because they were great. It never occurred to me to do things out of love.

I did have a sense of responsibility to make change in the world, but that came more out of my guilt in my own life situation—upper-middle-class, intellectual, athletic—than out of a love for the world or even my own community. I flew off to college and enrolled myself in as many social activist groups as I could find and decided that I was an atheist. I

honestly don't know what connection that had with anything. I just decided it one day, literally. I remember the day I decided. I was sitting in my room, not feeling particularly depressed or happy, not stressed or relaxed, just kind of sitting. I looked out the window and didn't see anything—I mean, I saw the sun and the sky and people sitting outside, playing Frisbee, but I didn't really *see* anything. And so I thought that if I couldn't see anything, then there must be no God. It was a completely unemotional decision.

Of course, looking back now, I think that decision was what put me in a place to find grace. I didn't expect anything. I didn't know at the time what I was being prepared for. I just felt frustrated with my life in general and couldn't quite put my finger on the cause.

In college, I enrolled in the secondary education program, deciding that I would change the world through teaching. Somehow, instead of working in a high school history class, I ended up teaching writing to a small group of fourth graders. That was OK with me. I just wanted to teach.

I walked into the school on the first day and was introduced to my students—Kevia, Cheyenne, Demarcus, and Shawn. Kevia immediately attached herself to me, dragging me into the room in which we would be working together for three hours a week for about four months. My task was to work with these four students on writing exercises so that they could pass the end-of-year writing test and move on to the fifth grade. I pulled out the first writing assignment given to me by the teaching assistant in my education class.

"Start by inciting their imagination. Writing should be fun, not a chore."

I agreed with that. I'd written in a journal since I was nine and loved every minute of it.

"Ask the students to think about a time in their lives when they were the happiest. Have them write about the scene in which they find themselves. You might start by exploring what the scene of a story is."

Great! I could do that. I began by talking with them about what a scene is. It was going well. They got it. Then I asked them to think about a time in their lives when they were the happiest. They screwed up their faces, doodled on their paper, asked each other, and came up with nothing.

"My mom's in jail right now, but it's not right. She shouldn't be there. That doesn't make me happy," one student said.

"Yeah, my dad's girlfriend is pregnant, and my mom's mad, and all she does is cry."

"I don't want to write."

"Yeah, me neither."

What was I supposed to do with this?

"OK, let's write instead about hard times in our lives. Can you describe that scene?"

What was I thinking? I just didn't know what to do. I was so shocked by the responses I got that my brain just wasn't working. Shawn began writing. Thank goodness. The others saw him, picked up their pencils, and bent their heads over the papers, working slowly, methodically forming each letter. I relaxed. I thought that Shawn must have picked up on my inability to connect with them and was trying to help me out.

About ten minutes later, Shawn showed me his work. I couldn't read it. It wasn't that it was messy. In fact, the letters were very neatly formed; they just weren't letters from the alphabet I knew. He didn't know how to write. The other kids passed in their papers. All the same. Every once in a while on each paper there were a few letters I recognized, but in general, they were pictograms and forms masquerading as letters.

I had a sneaking suspicion that these kids couldn't read, much less write. I pulled out a book that I had brought and opened it to the first page. The kids gathered around me, looking up, waiting for me to start reading. I handed the book to Demarcus, who immediately started running around the room, asking me what different things were, and needling Shawn until he got angry and

started fighting back. The two girls started pulling things off the craft shelves and asking if they could do art. It was suddenly chaos. It wasn't a sneaking suspicion anymore. They couldn't read. How was I supposed to prepare them to pass a writing test in three hours a week for four months?

I have to admit that I gave up at that moment. I gave up on those kids because I just didn't know what to do. The rest of the four months I spent bringing in books and trying to teach them to read. Maybe, just maybe they would get far enough to . . . what? I didn't know. They weren't going to pass the writing test. There wasn't time, and I didn't know how to teach them. I was so far from their experience. I didn't know what it was like to have a mother in jail or one who cries all the time. I didn't know what it was like to sit in a classroom of kids who can read when you can't. I didn't know what it was like to be ignored as these kids had been.

I gave up on teaching. I decided that I wasn't cut out for it. I dropped out of the teacher education program and decided that the thing for me to do was to take my senior year of college in Mexico. I was going to be a student, nothing more. I didn't really know it at the time, but I was ashamed. I blamed my failure in teaching on the program's not having prepared me for the job presented to me, but it wasn't the program's fault. I blamed myself for not thinking of something immediately that would engage these kids, but I couldn't expect myself to be prepared for that.

In Mexico, I studied the first semester and took the second semester off from school to do some work in a village in the southern part of the country. I could talk for hours about the things I learned from the women in that village, but what stays with me is Angela.

Angela was small for her age and had a terrible case of scabies. The parasite had moved into her face and was making her miserable. Her mother tried to treat it with medicine she got from one of the nurse volunteers who came to the village on the weekends, but she didn't understand how to use it. Rather than putting

the cream on once, waiting five days, and putting it on again, she put the cream on her daughter's face every day for an entire week. The chemicals burned the child's face and left her with gaping sores that wouldn't heal.

Angela's mother sent her to live with me and the director of the program in which I was working. I wound up taking care of her most of the time. At first it was kind of charming. We'd walk around the city together, and I got to practice my Spanish and just play a lot of the time. Then she started complaining a lot and stealing money from me, and people would stop me every five minutes to ask what was wrong with her and she would cry. Every night I treated her face with chamomile tea because everything else was too strong for her face to handle. She would lie down on the bed and close her eyes while I washed the burns with cold tea and gauze. I know it hurt her. But I also knew that nothing else would heal her.

One day, as I was washing her face, I was just overcome by a sense of gratitude that I had been put in a place where I had the opportunity to wash this little girl's face. I didn't understand where it came from. I felt so completely fulfilled doing that. I just forgot myself. I forgot myself for a minute, and God slipped in. I had never in my life felt so honest about anything I had done. I knew then that I wanted for my life to be one in which I was real, where I could just forget myself, where I could feel so completely connected with God through touching the burns on a little girl's face.

In that moment, I became a teacher. What was missing in me when I was working with those fourth graders was a sense that this world is bigger than me. I was selfish, and I didn't know that I was. I thought I was going into teaching to help the world, but really, I was going into teaching to help myself. I thought that if I could inspire children to want to learn, I would be able to inspire myself as well. It didn't work that way.

How could I possibly have imagined that the quote my mom included in my graduation advertisement would come back to me

in this way? "We can never do great things, only small things with great love." My mom and Mother Teresa were right. Only when we have cared so deeply that we forget ourselves can we understand how incredibly insignificant we are and at the same time how beautifully essential.

I am working now as the program director for the Self Knowledge Symposium, an organization that seeks to help young people find answers to questions like "Who am I?" Although I do not teach in a classroom, I hope that my work with young people inspires them to be open to finding answers in unlikely places, to accepting the possibility that there is more to this world than meets the eye, and that in order to learn who we truly are, we have to forget ourselves, doing not great things but small things with great love.

Since 1997, Mary Alice Scott has worked with students of all levels in a broad array of programs. She has taught leadership classes for middle school and high school–aged youth in a program called Youth Voice Radio, and presently she is the director of the Self Knowledge Symposium, an organization connected with Duke University and the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill. The mission of the organization is to invite youth to come together to pursue with passion and commitment a fuller understanding of who we are and what we believe. In her work, she feels most alive "when the level of authenticity in a room is markedly higher than in everyday life, when the class becomes a community willing to support and challenge its members to really go into asking important questions about their lives."

Many of us come to the profession filled with hope and enthused by ideals, but often we find we've lost our heart and passion for teaching. When we lose something that once held deep meaning for us, we can slide into a state of despair. Daniel P. Liston describes the anguish of realizing that he had lost his connection to students and his subject. Drained and bitter, Liston embarks on an inner journey that rejuvenates his love for teaching. He describes undertaking "despair work" to reaffirm his love and commitment for his teaching, his students, and his subject matter.

—S.M.I.

Despair and Love in Teaching

Daniel P. Liston

Some years back, I woke up to realize that I was no longer interested in going to the library, browsing the shelves, and checking out new titles. What used to be one of my favorite journeys, a delight and so much a part of my professional identity, now seemed dry and uninviting. For fifteen years, I had been engaged with the education of future and experienced teachers and with inquiry into the social and political contexts of teaching.

But after a while, I discovered I had lost interest. I no longer cared about the scholarly developments in "reflective teacher education" and found the political literature wanting. "Reflection" had become a technical educational slogan, one that didn't seem to resemble the original orientation. Critical commentary on schooling had taken a nihilistic turn, with

This work is drawn from Daniel P. Liston, *Love and Despair in Teaching: Feeling and Thinking in Educational Settings* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).

authors composing extreme positions that didn't connect to teachers' lives. I was still interested in teaching teachers and in pursuing topics related to teacher reflection and issues of educational justice, but I needed to find another way in. I was lost. I needed, but did not know it at the time, to reclaim my love of teaching.

Around that time, I also began to see my institution, and many other higher educational institutions, as bordering on being unresponsive to students' needs and inattentive to their desires. At my institution, students found few open doors or attentive ears. When they did find an opening and some attention, they poured out their souls. I became drained from taking on too many student concerns and bitter about the institutional arrangements. My love of learning and teaching were sorely tested and found lacking, and I fell into a big, dark, deep, seemingly unfathomable hole. It took what Joanna Macy identifies as "despair work"[1] and Iris Murdoch's understanding of love[2] to pull me out of despair's hold.

It took a year to see that my loves had been squashed and to find ways out. And I was fortunate. I work in a privileged environment. I'm a professor at a Level 1 research institution. No matter how dismal my work conditions, my work setting is relatively easy compared to the teaching situations of many others. I have multiple resources at my fingertips, the student-teacher ratio is low, and when I did crash, there were people around who helped break my fall. Others are not so lucky.

I was lucky in more ways than one. Some twenty-five years ago, I had the good fortune of being mentored by Robert Ubbelohde. While I was an undergraduate at Earlham College, Robert had arrived from the University of Wisconsin with a newly minted doctorate in hand, intellectually alive and fresh, soft-spoken, outgoing, and engaged in philosophical and practical pursuits. He introduced me to the work of Iris Murdoch (among others), especially her then newly published *Sovereignty of Good*.[3] He enabled me to see the beauty, power, and dilemmas of a teacher in love with investigating the worlds in which we live. When I did

fall into despair, I had available Murdoch's notions of contemplation and the good, a history of beloved and significant teachers who had put me in touch with the grace of great things,[4] and loving family support. It was during that time that I came to rely on and understand further the notions of love and their relation to teaching and learning. It was during this time that I faced one of the paradoxes of teaching, one to which Parker Palmer alludes in his *Courage to Teach*[5]: to resuscitate scorned love, one needs to embrace love.

I don't suppose that all those who lose their loves while teaching can have them resuscitated through despair work and embracing a larger love. But it appears that others have experienced similar terrain. One of Palmer's key understandings in *The Courage to Teach* is the recognition that as teachers, we need to attend to our inner lives. That work sanctioned and authorized the journey I was about to take, a journey that emphasized the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual components of teaching. It was a journey that gave me crucial sustenance and enabled me to resuscitate my love of learning and teaching. There were two "stops" along the way: first, I needed to deal with my feelings of despair, and then I had to affirm, once more, my love.

Despair in Teaching

I don't think I'm alone in experiencing despair. It seems to come with the turf of teaching. But first, it might be helpful to distinguish this despair from disillusionment. Both are experienced in teaching, but they are not synonymous. In teaching, as in many of life's other ventures, we frequently encounter unfulfilled expectations, dashed hopes, and an altered, grimmer sense of reality. Many new teachers face this disillusionment. Such disillusionment feels disheartening and can be demoralizing, but as I understand the phenomenon, it neither strikes to the core of the person or

endeavor nor undercuts an enduring sense of hope as despair does. Disillusionment bespeaks the possibility of a "reasonable" readjustment to a difficult situation. Despair entails a sense of doomed foreclosure, a circumstance that requires some sort of radical personal or contextual transformation.

As I understand it, despair arises from a numbness, an emptiness, and brings with it feelings of pain and anguish. For teachers, it is an emptiness that seems to have as one of its sources a sense of betrayal around and a rejection of our love of learning and teaching. Despair in teaching is a sense that one can no longer be the teacher who loves his subject, the worlds it opens, and his students. When the subject no longer enchants, it is difficult to invite students to engage in those other worlds. The invitation to share in the allure seems empty, and the attentive approach to students seems pointless. It is a sense that one cannot be the teacher one desires to be.

Some of this is captured by Chai, a Chinese emigrant in John Derbyshire's novel *Seeing Calvin Coolidge in a Dream*, when he recalls a former teacher's gifts and stories. Chai talks about his beloved teacher, Ouyang, who practiced an "art . . . so pure as to be transparent, but I see now that he was in fact an extraordinarily gifted teacher who took his work very seriously."[6] Ouyang told his students the following fable, one in which a crooked doctor would take money from people and give them ineffective medicine. Sometimes the medicine was poisonous and the patient died.

> In the natural course of things the doctor himself left this world at last and found himself standing in judgment before Lord Yan-Wang, the emperor of hell. It is difficult to imagine any crimes worse than yours, said Lord Yan-Wang. When people were suffering and helpless they placed their trust in you and paid you with silver and gold. You repaid them with poison and death. Eighteenth level! (In our old Taoist religion there were eighteen levels in hell, the deepest levels for the worst sinners.)

> Well, there was the poor doctor—though of course we should not feel *very* much compassion for him—down on the eighteenth level, resting up between tortures, crying out in remorse for his evil life, when he heard a knocking from below. Then very faintly he heard a voice coming up from beneath the floor of his dungeon: *Who are you? What crime did you commit to be immured so deep in hell?* The doctor was astonished. He had never heard that there were more than eighteen levels in hell; yet here, apparently, was a nineteenth level! Placing his mouth close to the floor he called down: I was a false doctor! But what great crime did you commit that you have been banished to a level so deep it has never been known to men? Came the answer: False Teacher.[7]

Teachers in despair feel like they're in hell. For the teacher who knows the power, beauty, and wonder of being touched by the grace of great things, who has been given that gift by another teacher, who has experienced what it means to attend lovingly to students and then have it taken away, the sense is devastating. The guiding direction, the integrity, the identity of a teacher vanishes. If one continues to teach, one becomes a false teacher, one acts in bad faith, one sits in despair.

While teaching at the university, I had fallen into despair. I no longer felt the power and allure of my beloved subjects. I had lost touch with the transformative power of education and with the power of teaching others about education. I grew wary and skeptical. I still approached my students with respect, but I began to fear that I might say something caustic or derisive, either in class or on one of my students' papers. I became frustrated, angry, and paradoxically, numb and empty. I slowly realized that my faith and intrigue in what I had to offer my students, my own love of education, had diminished. I felt like I had little to offer them.

Gradually I came to understand that I had to engage in what Joanna Macy calls "despair work." She writes:

> Despair cannot be banished by injections of optimism or sermons on positive thinking. Like grief, it must be acknowledged and worked through. This means it must be named and validated as a healthy, normal human response to the situation we find ourselves in. Faced and experienced, its power can be used, as the frozen defenses of the psyche thaw and new energies are released. Something analogous to grief work is in order. "Despair work" is different from grief work in that its aim is not acceptance of loss—indeed, the "loss" has not yet occurred and is hardly to be "accepted." But it is similar in the dynamics unleashed by the willingness to acknowledge, feel, and express inner pain.[8]

"Despair work" in teaching is needed. We need to approach it as a normal and healthy response to our teaching situations. I needed—teachers need—to understand the contours of this kind of despair, recognize that it is assiduously avoided by members of our culture, understand that its expression is not morbid, and feel and articulate the pain and discomfort associated with it.

When I have talked with practicing teachers who describe themselves as "burned out" or on the precipice of burning out, they frequently express feelings of emptiness, loneliness, frustration, and anger. They look at me as a teacher educator and ask, "Why didn't someone at the university tell me what I was getting into? Why didn't someone warn me?" They seem to be saying that if only someone had told them about the pain, the suffering, maybe they could have avoided it. In my classes at the university, I have had teachers walk in unsure if they are still teachers. They have left their classroom and come into mine, feeling devastated, tending their wounds, and wondering what to do. For each of these teachers, it is helpful to recognize the pain and discomfort, to honor the struggle, and to find avenues to discuss those feelings. Sometimes we're successful; other times we're not. Slowly I've come to believe that we need to contemplate one of the key sources of our despair,

our scorned love of learning and teaching, and confront one of the paradoxes of teaching: to resuscitate scorned love, one needs to embrace love.

Affirming Love in Teaching

How do we resuscitate scorned love, and why would we want to embrace a love that has caused such pain? This isn't simple terrain, but I think there are some ways to walk through it. I am suggesting that there are at least three kinds of love involved in the narrative of despair: a romantic love of learning and teaching; an attentive, loving orientation toward students; and a transformative, enlarged love. Good teaching entails a kind of romantic love of the learning enterprise. It is motivated by and infuses others with a love of inquiry. This love is a yearning for and reaching beyond oneself to engage other (natural and social) worlds. To infuse others with this love of learning, we have to attend to our students. We do this so that we can connect them with the material we have found so alluring. An attentive love looks clearly and with determination for the good in our students so that we can see their desires and the ways we can put them in touch with the grace of great things. Teaching in and with these loves is a vulnerable undertaking, one that leaves the teacher open to pain and rejection. When a teacher's love of learning or attentiveness toward students has been scorned, he may find himself in despair. This despair afflicts the teacher's soul.

We come to a larger love when we experience pain and suffering. In parenting, I have come to a larger love when my children face life's obstacles and enormities and I realize they must do it "on their own." In teaching, we come to a larger love when we see our students' lives disfigured by the forces of greed and selfishness and domination, when we've become worn down by the weeks, months, and years of struggling against these and other

forces. We also come to this larger love when, as teachers, we experience our own scorned love, a love that may have been disfigured in the past, distorted by powers greater than you or I. When confronted with our students' pain and our own scorned love of learning and teaching, we experience pain and suffering. In these situations, I have relied on a larger love to see me through those difficult times and help me stand the pain and suffering.

This larger love seems to be one way to come to terms with teaching's despair, to inform the quiet heroism that teaching must become. If guided by an enlarged love, teaching can become an ongoing struggle that nourishes our students' souls and our own. Through exploring and understanding our teaching despair, along with our love of learning in teaching and its loss, we may come to see more clearly the possibilities in a larger love. An enlarged love entails a diminished sense of self (ego) in the teaching enterprise, an attentive gaze outward toward the other, and an accompanying search for the good. With this larger love, I have refocused my attention so as to see more clearly the muddles and the opportunities, the headaches and the delights before me. I have had to look for and underscore the good, the beauty, and the grace that lies within the situation while recognizing the inescapable struggle and pain that also exists. And I have had to work at getting beyond my own selfish concerns, my "ego noise," so that I could discern the terrain more clearly. These are the contours of a larger love.

This larger love holds us in the pain, in the paradox, so that we can see it through and see through it. It is during these times, at least in teaching, when we recall the grace and power of our earlier loves. A teacher in despair, whose love of learning has been lost or scorned, may come to understand how to embrace love again. If we do, we come to transform the terms of our love of learning and our love for students. We become reacquainted with the grace, wonder, and beauty of both the lure of learning and attentive love. If we learn to suffer the opposites, during those times of hardship and suffering, we also learn the grace that attends enduring and

living with the pain. In this way, a teacher comes to understand the world as a place of connection and pain, one that can be tilted toward goodness and love. The teacher comes to understand that the material world is not all that exists; a spiritual realm is also reality.

Not all teachers come to a spiritual place. Parker Palmer did; others have, and so did I. This is difficult and uncomfortable material for me (and perhaps many others) to explore. In many ways and for many years, I have shied away from things spiritual. I have attempted to embrace a sense of beauty (and horror) of the worlds around us. I have approached these worlds with awe and wonder. I have tried to approach other individuals with a sense of respect. But to call this spiritual, to designate these experiences as within the realm of, or partaking in, the spirit, has taken some time for me to consider and accept. Others need not accept the spiritual tenets proposed here. One can, perhaps, embrace a larger love without embracing the spiritual. I'm not quite sure. It seems, however, that when we step into this larger love, we are placed in front of a window that opens up to the spirit.

Much of what I've talked about focuses on an inward journey. If we are to teach with some integrity and wholeness, those interior spaces have to be explored. But I have overlooked much in my account. There is a world of power, structures, and institutional forces that contort and distort our loves and contribute to our despair. And not only do these forces foster our despair, but they also cloud our understanding of our lives and work. In an era of narrow educational accountability and standardization, an awareness of teaching's despair, love, and spirit tends to get lost. As a teacher and teacher educator, I struggle against that.

As a teacher educator, I recall that the teachers who taught me the most loved their subjects and cared for their students. Mr. Keener, my demanding high school social studies teacher, showed us how history illuminated our worlds. He made us sit up straight in class and take notes, and we understood these demands as marks of his respect for us. Mr. Fleenor, my geometry teacher, lured us

into the world of geometry by helping us think logically, clearly, and elegantly. When we entered his room, we knew we would work at this together. Miss Dutro, my biology teacher, could look at a roadside weed and show us its ecological niche. She turned weeds into fascinating subjects, and she also believed we were fascinating.

All three of these teachers taught with a love of learning and attention to the students they taught. Their invitation to learn amounted to more than classroom order and an offering of facts, skills, and concepts to master. It was based on their love of learning and yearning to connect students with their beloved subject matter. What would they do in this era of narrow accountability? I don't know, but I do know that they have passed on to me an honored and valuable legacy.

Notes

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2. Murdoch, I. *The Sovereignty of Good.* New York: Schocken, 1971.
3. Murdoch (1971).
4. Parker Palmer draws on this notion to convey the power and wonder entailed in understanding the world, others, and ourselves in educational settings. See Palmer, P. J. *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
5. Palmer (1998).
6. Derbyshire, J. *Seeing Calvin Coolidge in a Dream.* New York: St. Martin's/Griffin, 1996, p. 85.
7. Derbyshire (1996), p. 85.
8. Macy (1991), p. 16.

Presently a professor of education at the University of Colorado at Boulder, Daniel P. Liston began teaching prereading and math at the Children's School in Richmond, Indiana, in 1976. Two years later, he moved to the Rosa Parks Middle School in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1982, he began his career in higher education and has taught at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and at Washington University in St. Louis. Aside from teaching, he codirects the Roaring Fork Teacher Education Project and is a research fellow at the Center for Educational Research, Analysis and Innovation at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. He has received several awards for outstanding teaching, including being named as a finalist for the Presidential Teachers Scholar Award, and he received the Teacher Recognition Award at the University of Colorado, the most significant student-generated award for excellence in teaching on the campus. Liston has published many articles on teaching, and his latest book, *Love and Despair in Teaching: Feeling and Thinking in Educational Settings* (Routledge, forthcoming), focuses on the role of deeply personal feelings and beliefs in our teaching. Earlier works include *Capitalist Schools* (Routledge, 1987), *Teacher Education and the Social Conditions of Schooling* (with Ken Zeichner; Routledge, 1991), and *Curriculum in Conflict* (with Landon Beyer; Teachers College Press, 1996). Liston says he feels "most alive in my teaching when our classroom conversation takes on a life of its own; when we listen, think, laugh, and cry, and we are changed."

Many career teachers struggle for decades to make their peace with their chosen profession. Underpaid and overworked, many teachers are acutely aware of how little status they are accorded in our culture. As a result of the perceived indignities, some teachers abandon the profession, others plod on resentful and angry, and some come to discover the value, meaning, and dignity of their work. Rosetta Marantz Cohen chronicles how her husband moves from resisting to resenting to coming to terms with and then embracing his profession. Through this journey, Sam Scheer is able to finally see "teaching as a whole way of being in the world," and with this realization comes energy, heart, and peace.

—S.M.I.

Sam Scheer

Coming to Terms with a Lifetime of Teaching

Rosetta Marantz Cohen

Located two exits up from Hartford, Connecticut, on Interstate 91, Windsor High School is in many ways a quintessential American public school—large and ethnically diverse, vibrant and chaotic. A visitor senses immediately the power and complexity of such a school: a pulsing rap beat blares from a car in the parking lot; Latin music rises out of a classroom; an ad for the Black Gospel Choir hangs above the cafeteria door next to a poster for the Gay and Lesbian Alliance. What an interesting and challenging place to teach, one thinks, walking down the hallway to Sam Scheer's classroom. What a perfect place for Sam to have found his niche.

In room 202, Sam Scheer, twenty-year veteran, sits in a circle with his sixteen Advanced Placement English students. They are discussing the narrative voice in *Pride and Prejudice* as the sound of jackhammers rises up from the parking lot—the remnants of a renovation project begun months earlier.

"I want to remind you," Sam says, "that the narrators we have seen in twentieth-century novels are not always trustworthy. In *The Great Gatsby,* for example, the narrator is himself morally implicated in the action of the novel." Sam speaks in beautiful prose sentences, elliptically constructed, effortlessly fluent. "In *Portrait of the Artist,* the narrator is immature at the start. We're conditioned to root for the narrator, to take his word for things, but in those modern novels we saw that it isn't always right to do so. . . ."

Students are writing down his words, nodding. "But what about in the nineteenth century?" Sam asks. "What is your impression of the narrator's voice in a nineteenth-century novel like *Pride and Prejudice*?" There is a lag of silence as students make the sleepy transition from passive listening to participation. Sam waits it out.

"She seems trustworthy to me," offers a boy to Sam's right. "She seems objective."

"Why?" Sam presses. "How do you know she's trustworthy?" Gradually, with the grudging help of all sixteen students, Sam begins to extract the evidence: The narrator's voice is the "golden mean," he says, the harmonious balance against which all other characters are measured. Students look, in turn, at every major character in the book, comparing the characters' voices to the elegant vernacular of the narrator. "Find it in the text," Sam says, again and again. When a student gives a rushed or unsupported answer, Sam hesitates: "I must respectfully disagree," he says—his language always perfectly attuned to the cocky, fragile sensibilities of bright adolescents. By the end of the forty-five-minute period, he has built a seamless argument, alluding along the way to Mozart and Aristotle.

"And wouldn't you know it," he says, "as the hero and heroine come together at the end of the book, whose language do they start to emulate?"

"The narrator," a girl whispers under her breath. "The golden mean," says another. "And the Mozart-like harmony of the

narrator's voice becomes the voice of the couple," says Sam. Everyone is scribbling away. Then the bell rings.

Slightly ragged from the work of Austen, Sam encounters class number two, a senior English standard-level class for college-bound students. After the all-white A.P. class, the diversity of this group is striking. Now there are only six Anglo faces in a group of twenty-eight. The sleepy compliance of the A.P. students has been replaced with a distracted energy; some students come in dancing; one gives Sam a high five as he enters. "Yo, Mr. Scheer!" says a boy in a giant black parka.

"OK, listen up," Sam says. "I've got some good news for you." The shuffling and talking continue, settling into a light patter. "We're reading *The Joy Luck Club,*" he says. Though they have been working on the book for three weeks, Sam tells me he must remind them each day. "Every day we start from scratch," he says.

"This book is divided into four sections, and you guys have already read three with me. I know you've had some difficulty with it, and that's cool. But we're at a really great part now, and I'm going to read it out loud to you, and then I'm going to explain it to you." He begins to read, and the class falls silent.

"This is Suyuan Woo's story of exile," he says, "and of the giving up of her two babies." His voice is lilting and dramatic; the story unfolds in a dreamy, easy way: the mother grows sick, struggles to carry her children, leaves them with a note at the side of the road. . . . Sam interrupts his reading every few minutes to root the listeners on: "Now listen to this," he says, and "You're going to like this; hang in there with me. . . ." They do. The end is poignant, emotional. Many in the class seem genuinely moved.

"Now I know that some of you are the children of immigrants," he says. "I wonder if this story seems true to you; I wonder, does it remind you of stories you've heard at home?"

One after another, the students tell their own family stories. Someone's mother treats her like she was still a child in China, affording her none of the freedoms enjoyed by other American

children. Someone's cousin was shot at the Mexican border. Someone else speaks about how different life was in Jamaica. When the bell rings, only a few students stand up to leave.

"That was a good one," Sam says afterward. "I really enjoyed that."

After so many years in the field, after teaching in five schools, after being riffed and underpaid and taken for granted, Sam has come to truly love the work he does. At the same time, he has become a passionate champion of the profession—a "master" teacher in the truest sense of the word. His transformation is as much a surprise to him, I think, as it is to me, his wife, who has watched the American educational system buffet him about year after year, undermine his morale, and test his mettle. It is not easy for anyone to continue to love work that is so demanding and unglamorous. But evenings, at the dinner table, it is clear that Sam has moved into a new relationship with the profession. The old ambivalence seems to have vanished. Sam speaks about his students now, and his colleagues too, with genuine affection, interest, and pleasure.

What has brought about this recommitment to a problematic profession? I think that a number of converging factors have influenced his transformation. The first one may simply have to do with Sam's age and the changes that affect many teachers after years in the field. There is a vast psychological literature that seeks to explain such transformations. Erikson[1] and Levinson,[2] for example, describe a predictable period of equanimity that besets many men of Sam's age—a quieting of ambition, an impulse to help others. Super and Hall,[3] writing specifically on career development, describe a similar stage, after age forty-five, when many teachers examine their life choices and make critical final decisions about careers. This midlife moment is perceived as the last point at which the profession can be abandoned—a crisis that, once weathered, can lead to a sense of recommitment. Finally, Francis Fuller,[4] in her seminal work on "stages of teacher concern," offers what seems like a neat description of Sam's current state: having

navigated the early, tumultuous years, Fuller would identify Sam as a mature veteran, possessing the characteristics that mark that passage: an interest in student concerns and needs, an interest in the philosophy of the profession, and a marked loss of interest in popularity.

Like so many teachers, Sam began his professional life in another field altogether. A child of the counterculture, he spent his twenties as a musician, living a kind of itinerant life—without schedule or boss—touring as the opening act for various 1970s folk groups. This artistic life was followed by an intense period of graduate study, at Oxford, where he earned a master's degree in philosophy, writing on the late poetry of Wallace Stevens. Neither one of these life stages in any way foreshadowed his future career.

Sam, in fact, stumbled into teaching in a rather grudging way. Home from graduate school and deeply in debt, he came to teaching as a way station on the real, as-yet-undecided path to his life's work. He started off in private schools, teaching guitar and English, with (I glean from the stories he has told me) a somewhat laid-back attitude about his job. This stage I would call "ambivalence and detachment." Every once in a while, Sam would become engaged by the mind of a student—usually a very bright one—and would work hard to find ways to stimulate the student's curiosity about literature. But mostly he taught on automatic pilot, using the classroom as a forum for talking to himself about books and ideas.

"In college and graduate school," Sam says, "I fell prey to a misguided form of 'bardolotry'—of hero worship for the great writers. I was so enamored of certain texts—it was a kind of religion for me—that it kept me aloof from the kids I taught. I thought [about my students], Either you get it or you don't; either you see it or you don't; and if you don't, I'm not going to put too much effort into you. . . . I don't want you to think I wasn't a competent and responsible teacher. I was. But my heart was with the text, not the student. I thought, the kids were there for the literature, not that the literature was there for the kids."

In the past few years, however, Sam says he sees his work in very different terms. "I now see reading," he says, "as a political act, as a way to help kids become advocates for themselves and know themselves. You can do it with the classics; you don't need to teach watered-down stuff; you just need to go at the literature in a different way. I used to teach writing as if every kid should become a literary critic. Now I teach it as a tool, as a way to redress grievances. I say, 'You have a gripe with a colleague or a corporation? Lay out your reasons; argue it logically.'" Sam says that he is now a pragmatist. "In the past," he says, "I had a kind of old-fashioned idealism that couldn't hold up against the realities of the classroom. I see now that you can be pragmatic; you can teach to where the kids are without debasing the material, without compromising your integrity. In fact, there is more integrity in doing it this way."

Changes in the economy and in the culture at large may also help explain Sam's recommitment. Sam began his teaching career in the late 1970s, at a time when the work of the teacher seemed less "cool." Graduates of good colleges in those days went immediately to law school or else to Wall Street, where hostile takeovers and the beginnings of a boom market were making millionaires out of the most pedestrian intellects. In the early 1980s, living in New York City, Sam would walk each morning to his battered Honda Civic past scores of young men in Armani suits, hailing cabs to their bank jobs. At night, he would curse the stubborn part of him that insisted on a life of literature. Having grown up in a lower-middle-class household, Sam suffered greatly from his decision to live in what he called "dignified poverty." It colored his view of teaching for many years. It created a nagging sense of dissatisfaction.

By the late 1980s, however, states like Connecticut had passed laws that dramatically increased teachers' salaries. Though teachers were still not high-paid professionals, their salaries were respectable. Moving to the country, to a working-class, academic community in western Massachusetts, also helped blunt the sense

of being a have-not. Now, living on two teachers' salaries, he says he felt suddenly "upper-middle-class"—a dramatic change in lifestyle and mind-set. "I owned a home; I had a wife and child. I was far away from the tantalizing alternatives that had distracted me in New York. It was easier to feel good about teaching in Northampton," Sam says. "The cushion of financial security was very liberating for me. It allowed me to see my work for what it was—as useful and meaningful."

Sam could also assess his choice to teach in light of the growing professional dissatisfactions he saw among his friends. "All around me, in the last few years, friends were reassessing their careers, feeling spiritually bereft, looking for ways to volunteer their time to make a difference. That's not a problem for a teacher. You help a kid reimagine his or her possibilities and you've made a difference. You get a kid to connect with poetry, and you've changed that person for life."

When I ask Sam to describe his relationship to the profession today, he says that he is now at peace with his choice. "Teaching is a whole way of being in the world," he says. "It's self-creation and service. It's artistic and altruistic. When I started out in this field, I saw teaching as a short-term job. I resisted *being* a teacher, in the fullest sense of the word. Now I see it as my life's work."

NOTES

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4. Fuller, F. F. "Concerns of Teachers: A Developmental Characterization. *American Educational Research Journal,* 1969, *6,* 207–266.

Rosetta Marantz Cohen began her teaching career in 1980 as a high school English teacher at the Calhoun School in New York City. In 1988, she joined the faculty at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. She presently teaches in the Department of Education and Child Study at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. The recipient of many research fellowships and grants, she writes about the life of the teacher in American society. She is the author, with Sam Scheer, of *The Work of Teachers in America: A Social History Through Stories* (Erlbaum, 1997) and *A Lifetime of Teaching: Portraits of Five Veteran High School Teachers* (Teachers College Press, 1991). "I feel most alive in my teaching," she writes, "when I am teaching material I love in a school that values teaching."

There are many moments when teaching feels too hard and painful—days when we walk out of class distraught by how lifeless or hostile our students appeared, weeks when our efforts to connect with students feel clumsy and mechanical, occasions when the institutional forces seem too contradictory to continue. That teaching is hard and exacting is not news. But what keeps teachers going? What keeps their hearts energized despite myriad obstacles? Researcher Sonia Nieto and thirty-year Boston high school teacher Stephen Gordon came together as part of an inquiry group of veteran urban teachers to explore how teachers keep heart despite the challenges they face in their work.

—S.M.I.

Adult Conversations About Unasked Questions

Teaching for Educational Justice

Sonia Nieto and Stephen Gordon

What are the truths that teachers believe about what they do, and how are these truths evident in their practice? What does it mean to teach with integrity, especially among culturally and linguistically diverse students in impoverished urban schools? And what inspires the most devoted teachers to continue in spite of the challenges they face on a daily basis?

These questions have become especially compelling for both of us, although for slightly different reasons. Sonia has been working with prospective and practicing teachers for over twenty years, and she finds this work more significant yet more challenging than ever before, especially given the public's diminishing support for education. Steve, after working for more than thirty years in the Boston Public Schools, is as devoted as he has ever been to his students, colleagues, and the profession of teaching but ever more impatient with the absence of student success and teacher respect. For both of us, conditions both in and out of school—inequitably financed schools, a crumbling infrastructure, overcrowded

classrooms, mandated quick-fix nostrums, a climate of blaming, and hopelessness and despair—have made our work more difficult. But we also know that in spite of disintegrating support for urban schools and the growing numbers of disengaged students and despairing teachers, some teachers refuse to give up, sustaining a fierce belief in their students and in the work they do. What it is that keeps some teachers dedicated and enthusiastic in spite of the many challenges they face? What makes the difference?

The Inquiry Group: "What Keeps Teachers Going in Spite of Everything?"

Sonia decided that the best way to find out was to listen to and talk with teachers as they struggled with hard questions related to teaching in urban schools today. She wanted to hear from superior teachers who continue to teach in spite of the numerous individual, institutional, and social obstacles that get in the way of their work. Her research design was simple and straightforward: She just wanted to talk with teachers. She convened an inquiry group of eight veteran teachers to share and discuss what it was that kept them in teaching.[1]

The inquiry group met monthly throughout the 1999–2000 school year, culminating with an all-day meeting in May 2000 at a retreat center outside Boston. All of those who took part in the group are highly respected teachers. They are passionate about teaching, and they think of themselves as intellectuals and professionals. They also unabashedly love their students and hold high expectations of them. Most are veteran teachers, although two had been in the system for less than ten years. They teach a variety of subjects, including algebra, English, African American history, and language arts in Cape Verdean Crioulo or Spanish. Some have mentored new teachers into the profession, and a few have been involved in professional development activities in the district and beyond.

They participated together in a number of activities, includ-

ing writing in response to specific assignments related to their work. They also talked about the books they read together and about the challenges of daily classroom life, and they occasionally exchanged e-mail with one another. The meetings were what Steve Gordon, the most veteran teacher of the group, described as "adult conversations about unasked questions."

Lessons from the Inquiry Group

Collaborations between teachers and professors are often based on unequal and unrealistic expectations. Professors are expected to hold most of the theoretical knowledge, and teachers are expected to be experts in terms of practical knowledge. We have come to understand, however, that in the best cases, teachers' practice is based on theorizing about actual classroom experiences and professors' theoretical knowledge is based on work in real settings. Through our collaboration in the inquiry group, we have become convinced that teachers and university professors have a great deal to teach and learn from one another. The inquiry group helped us put into words what it means to teach with integrity and hope, particularly in urban public schools today. It also helped us understand that teaching can be thought of as "doing educational justice," particularly when it is done in the kinds of schools that have largely been abandoned by the public.

Teaching from Deeply Held Values

bell hooks describes the classroom as "a location of possibility,"[2] and this sentiment cogently captures the fact that it is in their classrooms that teachers enact their most deeply held values. The inquiry group confirmed for us what we had already suspected: teachers' beliefs are deeply embedded in their classroom practices. Teachers do not—indeed, they cannot—leave their values at the

door when they enter their classrooms. As much as they might want to hide or avoid them, their values and beliefs slip in the door with them. As Ambrizeth Lima, a member of the inquiry group, explained, "Even in our indifference, we take a position." If this is true, then the best that teachers can do is confront these values candidly to understand how they help or hinder the teachers' work with their students.

How teachers' values make their way into their classroom practice became clearer to us as we continued to meet. One of the first activities was writing "teaching autobiographies." In these narratives, the teachers described how and why they came to teaching as a career. Several of them addressed their sociocultural and sociopolitical realities as the fundamental reason they became teachers. That is, their own identities were often the guiding forces in steering them toward teaching. For some, it was their growing realization as young adults that literacy and education had been systematically withheld from their people and from other culturally and politically dominated communities; for others, it was political work in antiracism or antiapartheid work or in community organizing for educational equity.

Affirming Identity

Because the inquiry group teachers understood the significance of identity in their own lives, they worked hard at affirming their students' identities. They rejected the notion that culture, race, or language is responsible for school failure. Instead, they believed that affirming students' identities could support their learning. Rather than exclude students' social and cultural identities from the curriculum and instruction, the inquiry group teachers used many opportunities to encourage students to explore their backgrounds, language, and communities. This was evident in the curriculum they developed, the books they used, and the other activities in which they engaged students. At the same time, the teachers rec-

ognized that it was both necessary and positive for students to grow beyond their own limited experiences, and so these teachers focused their curricula on ways to get students to engage with realities different from their own. Consequently, rap could exist alongside Shakespeare as exemplars of language, discourse, and culture: understanding one should help a student understand the other.

For instance, Steve would ask students to share and discuss the lyrics of hip-hop recordings, believing that developing student literacy includes their expressing and examining how the words in rap songs capture their views of American society. Steve has used rap in class for students to see lyrics as poetry and to direct students' attention to the form and function of language and to their ability to interpret author intent—in this case, the rapper's. He describes how he did this in one of his classrooms: "I taught minicourses called Poetry Through Music where students were required to copy lyrics, including rap; distribute them to the class; play the song; and then discuss the meaning and structure of the lyric." Through this course, he learned a great deal about hip-hop, especially about the politically focused group Public Enemy. "I continued to ask students to bring in hip-hop that expressed views on social issues, for I believe that developing students' literacy includes their analyzing to what extent and in what ways the words they hear in rap accurately express and describe their view of American society—Freire's 'reading the world.' " In another assignment, he had students pick one of Shakespeare's soliloquies, discuss the meaning and import of the character's words, and then translate the soliloquy into conversational English or a rap lyric.

Believing In and Loving Our Students

Another deeply held value shared by all the teachers in the group was what Steve called "a fundamental belief in the lives and minds of students." This was foremost among all their reasons for remaining in teaching, and it was the one response everyone agreed

on. What did this mean in terms of their practice? For one, it meant that they refused to accept excuses for students' lack of effort or achievement. They stubbornly insisted that their students were capable and smart, in spite of the labels the students may have inherited after years in the school system. The teachers focused not on personal failings on the part of the students but rather on *conditions in the school* that could help explain these problems. These teachers also knew that personal connections with their students were crucial to learning, and they worked hard at building relationships with their students. Though these connections are important, they are not always easy. At one point, Steve Gordon shared with us an entry from his journal that illustrated the uncertainty, dread, and indecision that even veteran teachers can face as they struggle with how to make their classes relevant and make these important connections with their students.

> My story begins Sunday afternoon, February 28, at vacation's end. I have just finished *Fist Stick Knife Gun*,[3] Chapters 17–25. With the exception of Chapters 22 and 24, the chapters are about what Geoffrey Canada did to help the kids of Harlem. What do I want my students to do? As I think this, fear comes over me. What is its cause? What is it about teaching these ninth graders that generates such uncertainty and dread? Why do I feel that it is so hard, that coming up with what is worthwhile is so hard, that being with them for one hour is so hard? What causes this anxiety? Yes, it is a challenge. Yes, I believe in doing it. In fact, it is my chosen profession, my decision to do this with students or teachers. But why is it so hard, so indefinite, so fraught with anxiety as I try to decide what to do, thinking that Tashia or Crystal or Thomas or . . . will not approve of my decisions, my work?
>
> I think of June and Seth and Denise, my colleagues, as if I am supposed to be able to do something that will affirm that I am a good teacher, appreciated by my students because I have

> come up with something that will empower them, that facilitates their learning, that gives them the choice to learn. . . . I am trapped by my own psyche and soul, which strive to do the right thing, yet I do not want to work so alone, so hard, and so emotionally in order to do the right thing.
>
> I want some certainty, some peace, a feeling that I cannot have. Do I just live through the anxiety of being a responsible adult who will have to fight for what he believes in, who will have to demand that students do *x, y,* and *z,* even as I search for the ways to involve them, engage them, on their own so that the class is theirs, so that literacy grows out of activities that are valued by them and consonant with my deepest values and beliefs?

Doing Educational Justice

Throughout our meetings, it became clear that this particular group of teachers thought of teaching both as intellectual work and in terms of social justice. For them, teaching was not simply mastering technical skills, or "tricks of the trade." That is, while they conceived of their learning as ongoing and necessary in order to improve their craft, they also thought of their professional growth as necessary in the struggle against the injustices faced by youngsters who attend schools that do not live up to the promise of educational equality. This idea was most powerfully expressed one day as we were discussing the profession's growing obsession with "best practices." Steve Gordon responded, "Rather than 'best practices,' we should have 'loving practices.' " This admonition was one that we referred to throughout the remainder of our meetings.

Having read and studied Paulo Freire's letters to "those who dare teach,"[4] Sonia asked the inquiry group teachers to write a letter they would give to a new teacher. Steve took this assignment as a way to think about his own commitment to the profession and to

express the inescapable but necessary dilemmas that accompany being a teacher. He expressed his ideas about what it means to "do educational justice" with and for students in urban schools. This is, in part, what he wrote:

> LETTER TO A NEW TEACHER
> Dear Colleague,
>
> You have made your decision. Against the advice of relatives and friends who may have counseled you against this career path, you have decided to teach. Reasons beyond starting salary and perceived prestige have called you to become a teacher, fully aware of how little gratitude and respect teachers receive in our free enterprise society, which values wealth over justice.
>
> You have concluded that being an adult responsible for the education of children is your calling. Why is that? What do you hope to give and receive as a teacher? When you see yourself in a classroom working with other people's children, what do you see yourself doing and saying that is so necessary to you—and them? Why do you want to teach? Why this school? Why these particular children? I suggest you write the answers to these questions now; examine and discuss them with those who care about your happiness. I hope that your answers motivate and sustain you in your day-to-day struggle to make a difference in the lives of your students. I hope the answers give you the courage and self-knowledge to endure and succeed—and to find allies in your work.
>
> I welcome you into my chosen profession. Beginning on your first day of teaching and perhaps never leaving, anxiety and self-doubt may be your constant shadow. They have been for me. In my worst moments, I have felt isolated and ineffective, even abandoned by colleagues and administrators. I see and feel the realities of my students, their wants and needs, and I think I have failed them, that I have not done the right thing, not done enough. And I have become angry,

ascribing my students' failure to racial and economic injustice.

I have learned to accept, even welcome, this dread, guilt, and anger. These emotions I believe have kept me honest, a spur to understanding what I must do and a shield against facile, mindless so-called solutions that repeatedly surface in a culture that refuses to recognize complexity and confront injustice. Rather than give you advice, let me share with you how I have attempted to sustain my commitment to my students, colleagues, and students after thirty years of teaching high school in Boston.

I have learned to acknowledge and express the anger that arises from the wide discrepancy between my goals for my students and their current achievements. I ascribe this disparity to the failure of our system to do educational justice for my students. I have seen students whose power and will to learn seem to have atrophied, students who do not possess the motivation and self-discipline necessary to excel, students who seem conditioned to compliance or resistance. I interpret these student attitudes and behaviors as the result of low expectations, misguided pedagogy, and spurious systemwide "solutions"—including the current standards and high-stakes testing movements. Nevertheless, I continue to hold my students personally responsible for their performance.

No matter how emotionally seductive and satisfying, I have consciously sought to avoid generalizations and accusations that might mitigate my disappointment at the expense of my students—their language, their parents, their race and culture. I acknowledge my frustration and do not repress my anger. By expressing my anger, I am forced to examine my students' learning needs and my teaching practices. By so doing, I am affirming hope and the willingness to take responsibility for my students' success.

I try to express my hopes and disappointments to my students, telling them what I expect and want from them. I believe that my expressed expectations will help teach them to

take more responsibility for their own education so that they will not merely comply or resist. I frequently ask them to evaluate the educational validity of what and how I am teaching. They must participate in their own education: a respectful fit between their individual cognitive and linguistic development and the school's academic requirements must be found. I have not yet succeeded in creating such a classroom community that counteracts years of negative school culture, but I will continue trying. This has been hard for me because I do not yet know how to engender sufficient student self-discipline and self-determination. Maybe you can help me. I have much more to learn.

To survive and grow, I had to find colleagues who share my angers, hopes, beliefs, and assumptions about students and teaching. When I have discussed my teaching with these caring colleagues, I work to specify exactly what troubles me; I fight the fear that having problems means I am doing something wrong. By example, I seek to help my colleagues become more professionally vulnerable, to name the individual classroom realities that inhibit their success and threaten their self-image as competent professionals. I avoid solving colleagues' problems by giving them advice; instead, through questioning, I work to find a way for them to reveal exactly what is troubling and why. Sharing difficult truths and emotions has been necessary for my personal and professional development. Fortunately, I have been a member of several teacher-research and inquiry groups that have supported this honesty, helping me examine and improve my teaching.

But these truths and emotions have been necessary but not sufficient to endure. I have learned to turn what troubles me about my students or my classroom into a researchable question. This may be difficult at first, for I have had to cultivate an inquiry stance about my teaching practice. I have

> learned to do research about my troubling questions, finding and reading what fellow teachers and researchers have discovered. For example, as an English teacher, I joined the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association. I read their professional journals. I want to create an intellectual community in my school wherein teachers share and discuss articles and books. I have become a teacher because I believe in intellectual development. I must take care of my own.
>
> I am happy that I found a profession that combines my belief in social justice with my zeal for intellectual excellence. My career choice has meant much anxiety, anger, and disappointment. But it has also produced profound joy. I have spent my working life committed to a just cause: the education of Boston high school students. Welcome to our noble teaching profession and our enduring cause.
>
> With hope and faith,
>
> Stephen Gordon

To "do educational justice" is no simple matter. It means teaching with hope and integrity, moving beyond bureaucratic fixes to educational problems to considering why the educational problems exist in the first place. Most of all, it means having the highest respect for our profession, for the work we do, and for the students with whom we work.

Through the inquiry group, we learned that teachers' identities, beliefs, and values influence their work with students; that a belief in and love for students is a paramount requirement of teaching; and that teaching is both intellectual activity and social justice work. It is our belief that both teacher education programs and school professional development efforts can benefit from these lessons. It would mean changing as well as engaging in the in-depth study of both the subject matter and the subjects—the students—they will teach.

NOTES

1. Sonia Nieto first approached Ceronne Daly, who at the time was the high school restructuring coordinator for the Boston Public Schools, and shared her idea of forming a yearlong relationship with a group of teachers. Daly enthusiastically helped recruit a small group of high school teachers, and in the spring of 1999, Sonia initiated the What Keeps Teachers Going in Spite of Everything? inquiry group. Twelve teachers showed up for the first meeting, and eight remained with the project for its duration: Judith Baker, Claudia Bell, Ceronne Daly, Sonie Felix, Karen Gelzinis, Stephen Gordon, Ambrizeth Lima, and Junia Yearwood.
2. hooks, b. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom.* New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 207.
3. Canada, G. *Fist Stick Knife Gun: A Personal History of Violence in America.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.
4. Freire, P. *Teachers as Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach.* Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998.

Sonia Nieto is professor of education at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She has been a teacher for thirty-five years, teaching students at all levels from elementary grades through graduate school. Her research focuses on multicultural education, the education of Latinos, immigrants, and other culturally and linguistically diverse students, and Puerto Rican children's literature. Her books include *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context of Multicultural Education* (3rd ed., Addison-Wesley, 2000), *The Light in Their Eyes: Creating Multicultural Learning Communities* (Teachers College Press, 1999), and *Puerto Rican Students in U.S. Schools* (Erlbaum, 2000). She has received many awards for her advocacy and activism, including the 1989 Human and Civil Rights Award from

the Massachusetts Teachers Association. She feels most alive in her teaching when she can see "the 'light in their eyes.' I wrote a book by this name, and that title still captures my sense of that moment when teaching is most exciting and fulfilling. Whether it's with young people (whom I taught for the first several years of my career) or with university students and teachers (whom I've taught since 1980), there is something quite magical when that light goes on."

For the past thirty-six years, Stephen Gordon has taught a broad range of students at the high school, college, and graduate levels. Since 1974, he has taught at Snowden International High School in Copley Square in Boston. He is presently the school's literary specialist and facilitator of teaching inquiry groups on student literacy and learning development. A strong believer in the power of teacher research as a vehicle for professional growth and development, Steve joined the Boston Writing Project and the Urban Sites Writing Network of the National Writing Project. In 1998, Steve was honored as a recipient of the Golden Apple award. Steve feels energized as a teacher when "students find the truest words for their experiences and understandings, expressing how they see the world and what they understand or do not understand; when they speak about their learning and my teaching, convinced that they must participate in their education and help me become a better teacher; when they struggle to understand authors and peers whose words and ideas may make their world more explicable; and when in passionate speech and writing, they claim and proclaim their respect and identity as adolescents who have power over their lives."