

“What Makes a Great Teacher? A Tribute to Mr. Primack and the World’s Other Excellent Educators”

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I was a 12 year old sixth grader in the late 1950s; and Mr. Primack was probably the best teacher I ever had. I think he was in his 30s; but I can’t be sure. When you’re 12 all teachers seem old; and some seem older than others. All I know is that he made me want to go to school.

Mr. Primack knew how to make learning fun. When we had a social studies unit on Mexico, he pulled out all the stops. He made us do the regular school stuff like coloring maps and doing written and oral reports on Mexico’s history, political system, natural resources, people, and culture. But such mundane matters never satisfied him. At the beginning of the project he announced, “To study Mexico, we must talk, eat, sing, and dance like the Mexicans!” Mr. Primack wasn’t afraid to take us into uncharted waters. We Anglo kids of privilege were in for what qualified in those days as a cross-cultural learning experience.

He drilled us in the essentials of Espanol until Como esta usted? and Muy bien, gracias easily tripped off our tongues. In the morning it was Buenas dias and in the afternoon it was Buenas tardes. We asked and answered Como se llama? until we were blue in the face. In no time we were all amigos. He played records of Mexican folk songs and taught us La Cucaracha, which made us laugh every time we sang it.

Everything we did culminated in the Fiesta! He enlisted the help of several Moms and we put together a menu for the big day: Nothing that would pass muster in Cancun, mind you, but close enough. I was thrilled to be assigned to the “shopping committee,” which meant an extra field trip to the supermarket to purchase the goods, until I realized that Mr. Primack wanted us to keep track of our purchases as we went along to stay within our budget—an exercise in arithmetic! Mr. Primack knew how to turn even the fun stuff into a learning experience—or maybe it was the other way around.

When the big day arrived, we all showed up in our best versions of native costumes, feasted on tacos and burritos, beat the living daylights out of piñatas, sang our songs, and even tried our hand at Mexican folk dances. Dancing was Mr. Primack’s forte. I can still see him climbing up on his desk to show us how to do the Mexican hat dance. To this day, when no one else is around, I can still rip off a pretty mean hat dance myself, thanks to his excellent instruction. Some things are just too good to forget.

Everybody has a favorite teacher or a favorite teacher story. I had a number of great teachers in my life; and they all left their mark. What makes a great teacher? Not all great teachers are great in the same way, but many of them share certain things in common.

Clear communication. Great teachers know how to explain things. Each subject has its own internal logic, those cognitive handles for novices to hang on to and (to change the

metaphor) those bore-holes that allow the uninitiated to get inside a new idea. Great teachers know what they are and how to use them to help students get connected. At the University of Chicago, beginning chemistry, physics, or economics students are likely to be taught by a Nobel Prize winner, not a teaching assistant or a newly-minted Ph.D. Why? The university wants new students to be exposed to the very best teachers, those at the top of their game, both in terms of knowledge and experience. Of course, not all Nobel Prize winners are the best communicators, so the University chooses only the best of the best to teach its first year students.

Great communicators come in all shapes and sizes. But one does not have to be a Nobel Prize winner, a born actor, or a great orator to get through to students. One just has to know one's subject and understand how students think to get through to them. Great teachers will try anything to help their students "get it." A chemistry professor at Erskine College in South Carolina dragged himself out of bed at 11 pm the night before the big test to explain a sample problem to a group of confused students in the dorm who called him in a panic. He stayed until everybody understood.

Contagious passion. For reasons sometimes hard to understand, great teachers want everybody to love their topic as much as they do. In the real world, the chances of that seem small; but somehow great teachers are able to pull it off. Every teacher has faced someone whose body language screams, "I dare you to make me care about this." Many teachers give up on such students and concentrate instead on the easy converts; but other teachers make them their special project and will not rest until they have won them over.

My hunch is that the greatest teachers do not have to be so calculating. Their passion has a way of drawing students in. One of my great teachers was George Ladd of Fuller Seminary. He was an exacting teacher and personally troubled about many things; and he knew how to terrify unprepared Greek students. There never was any doubt that Ladd loved what he was teaching. One day, while the class worked its way through the Parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15, he broke down and cried. He shared with us from his personal experience what it cost the father in the story to forgive his wayward son. From that moment, I was hooked. Ladd's passion opened new doors for me; his passion made me passionate about studying the Greek New Testament.

If the teacher doesn't care deeply about her subject, why should her students?

The best teachers never let their passion turn them into bullies. In their zeal some teachers belittle and abuse students who come to class with different perspectives or will not accept the instructor's perspective. Great teachers take students as they are, respect their opinions, no matter how misguided or uninformed, and then do their best to provide them with tools necessary to think new thoughts. Through brute force or the coercive power of grades, one can get students to parrot back the teacher's ideas; but it is much harder to give students the tools to evaluate ideas and come to their own conclusions. Passionate teachers can either hinder or enable their students, depending on how their passion plays out in the classroom or beyond.

Side bar: “The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.”—William Arthur Ward.

Funny and Fun. When people are asked to describe their favorite teacher, it is amazing how often they mention humor. By reading between the lines of their comments, one discovers that “humor” includes both being funny and making learning fun. There is a difference. Some teachers are downright hilarious. They make jokes, tell funny stories, and think up games that keep students in stitches. They are comedians with a teaching credential. Other great teachers could not tell a joke to save their lives; but they know how to keep their students interested and involved. Brian Walker, a political science professor at UCLA, sounds like he is both funny and fun. In his “Introduction to Political Theory” class, he often assumes the identity of various political theorists by bouncing from one chair to another in order to debate various view points with himself. To keep students thinking and talking about his courses, he also holds potluck suppers and sponsors informal “philosophy walks” around Westwood.

My sixth grade teacher Mr. Primack was both funny and fun too; but there is no evidence that Socrates kept them howling in Athens in the 5th century BC. His probing method of questions and answers provoked students to challenge authority and think for themselves, two activities that students through the ages seem to enjoy immensely. Without a sense of joy and discovery, learning is not worth the effort.

One last word on humor: great teachers quickly learn that it is never wise to have fun at someone else’s expense. The best kind of humor in the classroom is the self-deprecating variety. Making fun of students is not funny, even though it may get a laugh. Such humor sucks the air out of the classroom and makes students reluctant to stick their necks out with questions or comments. Nobody wants to be on the receiving end of sarcasm. Great teachers find other ways to have fun and be funny.

Side bar: “At the end of the day, good teaching is about having fun . . . like locking eyes with a student in the back row and seeing the synapses and neurons connecting, thoughts being formed, the person becoming better, and a smile cracking across a face as learning all of a sudden happens.”—Richard Leblanc.

Student-centered. Great teachers are in it for their students, not for themselves. In his article “What Makes Great Teachers Great?” Ken Bain put it this way: great teachers “create a natural critical learning environment. ‘Natural’ because what matters most is for students to tackle questions and tasks that they naturally find of interest, make decisions, defend their choices, sometimes come up short, receive feedback on their efforts, and try again. ‘Critical’ because by thinking critically, students learn to reason from evidence and to examine the quality of their reasoning . . . and to ask probing and insightful questions.”¹ The best teachers make students responsible for their own learning by showing them that what they are studying raises broader questions about who they are and how life ought to be lived. Great teachers ask students tough questions and help them see their significance. Once students discover that questions are important to them, real learning begins.

The biggest challenge in teaching is getting students to reconsider things they think they already know or to care about things they have never thought about before. Either way, great teachers lead students into new territory. *Dead Poets Society* (1989) is one of the best movies about teaching ever made. John Keating, played by Robin Williams, is a new English teacher in a snooty, tradition-bound boys' prep school during the fifties. He cares deeply about his students and has them read poetry to learn about life. To make a point, one day he climbs on top of his desk and asks, "Why do I stand up here?" One boy answers, "To feel taller!" "No," Keating replies, "I stand up on my desk to remind myself that we must constantly look at things in a different way." Then he invites each student to take his own turn on top of the desk. After that demonstration, things start happening. Keating's students begin to understand poetry—and life—in new ways.

Bain sees this student-centered approach as central to great teaching. "Many teachers never raise questions; they simply give students answers," as though their students really care about what the leading scholars in the field are saying and doing. "In contrast, the best teachers tend to embed the discipline's issues in broader concerns, often taking an interdisciplinary approach." Bain refers to how Professor Dudley Herschback teaches chemistry at Harvard. He uses science, history, and even poetry to show students how the desire to uncover the mysteries of the natural order has led to important scientific discoveries. Donald Saari, a mathematics professor at the University of California, Irvine, does not just demonstrate how to do calculus in front of the class. He shows his students how to analyze the nature of the problems they are working on and find the best way to solve them. "I want the students to feel like they have invented calculus and that only some accident of birth kept them from beating Newton to the punch." Great teachers don't do all the thinking for their students; they teach them how to learn on their own, outside of class and long after the class is over.

Side bar: "Maybe there is one trait that separates great teachers from those who are merely good: this ability to open doors and give you the power to walk into new worlds on your own."—Tamim Ansary

Connect with their students in personal ways. Great teachers come alongside students and get to know them. They go beyond the "sage on the stage" persona to find out what their students are like, what they are concerned about, and what they are trying to become. In my experience, really good teachers start out by asking what their students want to get out of the course. Sometimes they do not know; but often their answers are revelatory and can be used to reshape the teacher's approach in order to make better connections.

In a way, to be great, teachers have to love their students, even while they are putting them through their paces, holding them to high standards, and passing judgment on them by assigning final grades. The cliché comes from a profound insight: teachers teach students, not just a subject. Students come to class as whole persons—or at least as people on the way to wholeness. The greatest teachers want their students to succeed as people, not just learn their lessons.

John Keating of *Dead Poets Society* can again illustrate the point. At the beginning of the term, he gathers his English class in front of the display case of earlier class photos. He invites his students to take a good look at their predecessors: “They're not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones, just like you. Invincible, just like you feel. The world is their oyster. They believe they're destined for great things, just like many of you, their eyes are full of hope, just like you. Did they wait until it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable? Because, you see gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils. But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on, lean in. Listen, you hear it? - - Carpe - - hear it? - - Carpe, carpe diem, seize the day, boys, make your lives extraordinary.”

I left Mr. Primack's class and moved on to different teachers and classrooms. Twelve years later I found myself in seminary and about to give my first real sermon in a local church. Who should I spy in the congregation but my old teacher Mr. Primack. I was almost struck speechless. What was he doing there? After the service, I got to speak to him. Someone had told him I would be sermonizing; and he wanted to see how I turned out. He said that he always believed that I would do well in life and that he was proud to have had me as a student way back when.

Now that is a great teacher. Back at you, Mr. Primack. The pride was all mine.

¹Ken Bain, “What Makes Great Teachers Great?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 19, 2004.