Reflection

The Classroom as Home: An Essay on College Teaching

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Part I : A Question

In the friendly context of the small university from which I am now retired, my fellow retirees and I have been treated with respect and kindness. A room was set apart for us to hold our weekly Thursday morning coffee hour. We have regularly been invited to attend various faculty functions, both academic and social. We have been given faculty library privileges, access to photocopying facilities, and more. All in all, we have enjoyed many privileges by no means available to retirees in all institutions of higher learning, and we know and appreciate this. When expressing this appreciation to current administrators and faculty members, I have repeatedly received responses like: "Oh, you [retirees] are very important to the institution; we need your experience and your wisdom." This begs me to ask myself: What experience exactly? What wisdom? Where am I drawing on it in the service of the institution? And ultimately: Do I have any experience and wisdom of the kind that can still profit the institution? I am in no way casting doubt on the sincerity of those making the assertion—but are they right?

From the time I taught my first college class in the fall of 1953—at the age of 21 and with only a B.A. received that same fall—until I taught my last for-credit course in the spring of 2002, I indeed lived through a long teaching career, most of it in the same college (eventually university). Ought I not to have many things to share with, and at least some wisdom to hand on to, a less-experienced younger generation of college teachers and administrators? If I do, what precisely would that be?

Here my doubts arise. In the past, to have experience meant literally "to have travelled around extensively" and figuratively "to have seen much of the world and of life" (cf. the German *erfahren*—to drive about extensively; to experience). To obtain such experience required a lengthy life, so that age was a precondition of experience or know-how, and setting such experience to good, life-enhancing use was wisdom. But does this age-related and

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experience-based wisdom still provide what a younger generation might find life-enhancing? Aren't the ways that worked well in the past precisely what has to be left behind today, superseded by more recent inventions, resources, experimentation, discovery, and practice?

Ongoing change is as inevitable in education as in life generally. Attitudes toward learning change. Methods of teaching change. Teaching equipment changes. And so on. Take language teaching. For years I taught German as I myself had been taught languages, that is, by a method analogous to building. Memorized vocabulary was the building material, and grammatical rules were the construction blueprint according to which that material was shaped into a building, the language to be learned: a sequence of correctly structured sentences and paragraphs. The teacher knew the material and the blueprint, and how to use them. The student was the apprentice learning the trade. Lecture, memorization, and practice prevailed. Gradually, more inductive and participatory approaches took over. Language labs came into use (and faded away as personal electronic devices replaced them). I adjusted my teaching to such changes, moved through a plethora of textbooks and classroom strategies, and survived reasonably well. Innovations have of course continued to appear since my retirement, in both the repertoire of teachers and the learning modes of students. The use of PowerPoint is one example; I would be interested to hear teachers and students reflect on the gains it provides, and perhaps also on the losses.

More epochal changes, however, emerged in the last third of the 20th century under the umbrella designation of "Postmodernism." They can be summarized briefly as the rejection—sometimes vehement, sometimes subtle—of the Enlightenment agenda, or "Modernism." Objectivity of knowledge has been challenged by subjectivity. It is not simply a change from Modernism to Postmodernism, but—at least in my opinion—a surging ahead of both, sometimes in irenic dialogue, sometimes in reciprocal rejection.

This thumbnail sketch of ongoing change on both the micro- and macro-level takes me back to my initial question: Do I have any experience-based wisdom to share with younger college teachers? Even in times of greatest change, what remains constant is even greater—a notion I freely borrow from philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*

(*Truth and Method*, original German 1960). Encouraged by this conviction, and aided by the joy in reminiscing and the pleasure of writing, I will venture below to share some of my experiences with younger teachers, keeping in mind, as my primary implied readers, those working in post-secondary Christian institutions.

Part II : My Response

What is teaching? I wish to approach my reflections on this subject by way of an analogy: *Teaching is a form of extending hospitality.* An analogy is by definition suggestive and not compelling; other analogies can often be substituted. In this case, a well-known alternative could be "Teaching is a conversation between generations." I did not begin my teaching career with "hospitality" in mind, but over many years and in different teaching areas and contexts, it increasingly permeated my thinking and practice. Within this interpretive frame, the teacher is the host, functioning as such on three successive levels or stages, while the students are the guests.

The First Level of Hospitality

The first level of hospitality in teaching has to do more with attitude and atmosphere than with strictly "academic" matters. When you, the teacher, begin a new course, you are inviting the students to step as guests into a new home—your home! This is true in an external and an internal sense. Externally, your first task after you enter the classroom and the door has closed behind you, is to convey to the students—they are not yet a class!—that you are at home here and they are your guests. They have entered a new space, as it were, even if they have already taken other courses taught in the same school and in the same room, even courses taught by the same teacher, for the essentials are mostly new: the constellation of personalities, the focus of activity (the subject matter), and above all, the thought world or mindset within which you will approach the subject matter. You are at home in these things, and the students are not. In this sense, you are the host and they are your guests.

What makes for a good host? In my experience it is the commitment to creating and cultivating an aura of assurance, relaxedness, firm friendliness, and anticipation of something good lying ahead. Think of a social visit.

When you enter someone else's home as a visitor, being welcomed by your host into a friendly and promising atmosphere of togetherness sets a good tone for the visit. In the classroom, this welcoming atmosphere has to begin in the teacher's own state of mind. You must want to be there and teach these students. You must have planned the first class so as to insure a good start in this direction. To maintain it later must naturally follow, but I cannot emphasize enough the vital importance of the first class for accomplishing this task successfully.

Externals are of course also important in setting the tone of the course from the very beginning. They may vary, and how a teacher chooses and uses them is in part a matter of intuition on the spot. Intuition, however, will work best if you have considered options in advance. In the long run, your authority and respect will depend on your positively perceived personality and your competence, but these are still unknown to the class. In my experience, a good start toward instilling both assurance of a safe environment and confidence in the teacher begins with communicating purposefulness on the teacher's part.

To write a *brief and simple* outline for this first hour on a white sheet, or to project it on a screen, may be such a start. On the other hand, to present a complex outline of the first hour, or even of the whole course, whether by handout or PowerPoint, deflects students' attention from a face-to-face meeting with you, their host. Other and perhaps more creative ways of encountering students in a purposeful and re-assuring way certainly exist. The ingenuity of different teachers has wide scope here.

Is it really necessary to make conveying a sense of security and creating a trusting relationship such a priority at the post-secondary level? Aren't young people at that age confident and self-assured, having been encouraged at the lower levels to get up in public, speak their minds, and believe in themselves, with the world at their fingertips by means of their electronic devices? Throughout my teaching career I had much evidence of considerable anxiety among first- and second-year college students, but also among more advanced ones, even when they seemed self-assured. As time went on, I did observe an increasing readiness on the part of students to speak in front of the class, and to choose assignments requiring interaction with others, artistic expression, leadership functions, and more. Yet today,

when I observe students in the bus on their way to university or on campus clutching and fingering their devices and ignoring the people around them, I wonder whether they are not shrinking from facing the real world around them by escaping into a virtual world. They seem anything but secure to me. What do younger teachers observe?

When it was time for me to speak in the first class of the semester, I began calmly and not too loudly. If noise persisted, I stopped. It is very important to establish immediately that the teacher speak only when the class is quiet. This furthers the communication of purposefulness and security.

The Second Level of Hospitality

As host, you are not only welcoming your guests (the students) into an external space (the classroom) where your friendly but purposeful reception evokes expectations of positive togetherness; you are also introducing your guests into an inner, intellectual sphere (the course subject) in which you are at home, and into which you will forthwith welcome them. I found it important to begin this second level of welcoming in the very first class. Institutional regulations generally require the early distribution of a course syllabus containing instructions regarding schedule, textbooks, requirements, allotment of grades, etc. So be it. However, I preferred to summarize the nature of the course, sketching its main aims and approaches very briefly and asking the students to read the syllabus on their own in preparation for questions to be taken up in a subsequent class. I considered—and still consider it—seriously counter-productive to spend the first class hour on the syllabus. Instead, I made it my practice to devote approximately one-half of that hour to taking students on an initial foray into the course's actual subject matter.

Here let me offer one sample from each of my two main teaching areas, Old Testament Studies, and German Language and Literature, followed by some explanatory comments. In Old Testament Introduction, I often read with the class the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) and God's call of Abraham (12:1-3), using these closely related texts to introduce the theme of promise (of descendants and land) that runs through the book of Genesis and beyond. In German language courses, sometimes introductory level but usually intermediate or higher, I might offer a little bit of rudimentary

philosophy of language as, for example, the function of grammar in making communication easier than it is in grammatically less-developed languages. Or I would draw students' attention briefly to the relatedness of German and English, pointing out some similarities and differences.

In both these fields my opening plunge into the course material was meant to perform two functions: (1) each time it contained a little surprise; (2) it always suggested, if ever so gently, that the course just might be somewhat interesting, and not only repeat familiar territory and meet academic requirements. Let me explain: Students enrolling in Old Testament Introduction could be expected to have some general knowledge of the Creation Story, together with a vague awareness of controversies between creationists and evolutionists, religion and science, etc. Few, in my experience, were particularly enthused about turning to Adam and Eve once again. To connect with the Old Testament by taking up an extended theme, such as promise of descendants and land, usually surprised them and captured their interest. Detailed attention would be given to the rich creation texts later in the course.

Students taking a course in German language (or Greek, or Hebrew) from whatever motives were likely to be braced for the tedium of memorizing vocabulary and "boring grammar." While rote memorization is unavoidable in learning a new language (despite my earlier comment on changes in modern language teaching), college-level study of a language need not be a belated effort at memorizing thoughtlessly something done better at a younger age. Instead, the teacher can introduce students to a deeper understanding of language, the most human of human faculties of communication.

The Centrality of the Teacher

To conceive of the teacher as host, initiating and being primarily responsible for vouchsafing the mental climate of the course and directing its progress, may raise questions for readers concerning the teacher's centrality in this model. What about the Socratic Method? What about that already-mentioned definition of education as a conversation between generations? What about the student's role in the learning experience? Isn't the student to become the architect of his or her own mental world, rather than inherit and inhabit the teacher's world? These are legitimate questions.

Allow me here to return to the theme of change. In my major field of specialization (Old Testament and Near Eastern Languages), I had the privilege to study with professors of deservedly eminent stature. The "historical-critical method" was then the dominant approach in most major seminaries and universities. I admired my teachers and was a good student. My Harvard doctoral dissertation was "form-critical" in its approach, employing historical-critical methodology. However, the historical-critical method, while not altogether displaced during my teaching career, was supplemented and often challenged by a plethora of new approaches, such as canonical, literary, sociological, reader response, and other criticisms. I found aspects of these approaches very enriching and adopted them.

At times my adoption of newer methodologies seemed to create inner distance between me and my own teachers, as far as the treatment of course content and approach was concerned. Was I betraying my admired mentors by adopting newer trends? Not really. Their modeling of systematic application of methodology, their wealth of knowledge, and their integrity as persons (and Christians in many cases) continued to shape my thinking and teaching long after I had modified, abandoned, or transcended many of their methodologies and findings. In short, their impact as persons—and as generous hosts—retained its shaping impact on both my life and my scholarship. Such observations confirm my conviction that in the teaching/learning process at the post-secondary level, the teacher is more central than the structure of curricula and the methodologies employed in academic disciplines, and that this central role is more resistant to change than these structures and methodologies.

Although I am strongly emphasizing the centrality of the teacher, I am not insisting on a predominantly lecture-centered approach. Lecture-centered teaching did predominate in higher education during my earlier teaching years, as it did throughout Europe and North America. (The German designation of a professor's class structure is tellingly called *Vorlesung* [lecture], that is, a presentation *read* to the class). Students sat back, listened, and took notes. The stress lay on content and not on mode of presentation. With time, however, and probably in part due to the impact of television, students increasingly expected greater variety in presentation, and professors learned to resort to new forms of learning activity involving

group presentations, small group discussions, debates, journaling, artistic class presentations, recordings, and more. I even impersonated the prophet Jeremiah in some Old Testament Prophets courses, coming to class in a Middle Eastern colored tunic, appropriate headdress, and a walking staff! Nevertheless, I believe that ultimately the highest form of rational human communication of thought is well-spoken or well-written prose.

The Third Level of Hospitality

The third level of hospitality does not require effort and planning on the teacher's part. You have engaged in it largely subconsciously, but inescapably, all along. Students who accepted your invitation on the first two levels will have inevitably accepted from you—and also from their other teachers—an invitation into your philosophical/spiritual home, that is, into your worldview (*Weltanschauung*). Our *Weltanschauung* develops as we integrate many fragments of information and experience. Everyone agrees that fragments of knowledge, or floating pieces of information, do not make for an educated person. Only if they are increasingly coagulating within our inner thought world into systems or, as a postmodern mentality might prefer, into narratives, is there movement and growth toward discovering understanding and purpose of life and the world.

However, the times when grand thought systems aimed at the integration of all knowledge—I am thinking of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, or Hegel—seem to belong to the past. Shall we therefore abandon all efforts at integration of knowledge and thought? Is there an alternative? Perhaps we are rightly learning the humility to accept the fact that human self-understanding and world-understanding must remain partial and fragmentary, for we lack a vantage point outside the cosmos which alone would allow comprehension of the whole. Descartes in his famous dictum "cogito, ergo sum" saw that vantage point in the human intellect. Times have changed, however, and it is precisely the dethronement of that worldview of the Enlightenment, or "Modernism," that appears to leave us with nothing but a fragmented world. Anything more is self-deceit or, from a Christian perspective, idolatry.

Partial understanding, however, is not the same as *no* understanding, and *partial* integration is more than *no* integration, which would amount to

mental chaos. If teachers can transmit this, and students can perceive that in their teacher's mental world there has been some success in fitting fragments of knowledge together, of sense-making that points toward the existence of a greater sense, they can gain the confidence necessary for seeking sense—partial but satisfying sense—from their own vantage point on the world. In other words, teachers can, by demonstrated example, invite their students into a mentality of confidence and hope that encourages the students' own attempts to integrate their knowledge and understanding. Even if the result always remains partial, it is not doomed to total failure, and thus students can become empowered to struggle for signs of meaning in their own intellectual and emotional world, and thereby to find a sense of a cosmic home that they can inhabit.

Such signs are at least somewhat analogous to the signs making up the foundations of theistic faith or, more specifically, of biblical faith. Central among them is the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For believers also live with the knowledge that a full understanding of the transcendent reality of the Wholly Other in whom they believe—of the reality in which they place their trust—remains surrounded by mystery. In this way, the Christian teacher can help students to transcend the sense of home tasted in the teacher's mental world and to feel at home in God's infinitely greater world, even while understanding it only in a very fragmented way. The Apostle Paul writes: "For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part" (1 Corinthians 13:9).

My understanding of limited but convincing insights as signs or invitations to faith in a greater Truth, the truth of God, is a more hopeful stance than the existentialism of, for example, Franz Kafka a century ago. Kafka's characters seek an encounter with the distant Lord, toward whom a deep-seated longing and fleeting glimpses from afar make them press on, even though the way always seems to end in confusion and loss of orientation. Similarly, my understanding of the deepest human search for sense in the face of an apparently incomprehensible universe is more positive than Alasdair MacIntyre's recent model of a fractured truth for which the underlying coherent conceptual pattern has been lost, so that attempts to fit the fractured pieces together must result in incoherent combinations. (MacIntyre did eventually move beyond sheer fragmentation, becoming a

Roman Catholic Christian.)

Let me return to the beginning of these ruminations. Do I have any morsels of wisdom, based on a long career in teaching, to hand on to a younger generation of teachers? That is a question I really cannot answer. I believe I do, but if those of a younger generation should respond that I am addressing questions they are not asking, I will not be offended or feel slighted. We are historical beings, shaped by specific contexts that have their time and then pass on. Only One is eternal and must remain the center of our lives; all else, if endowed with undue finality, becomes idolatry.

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