

CONVERSATIONS WITH GREAT TEACHERS

BILL SMOOT

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This book is dedicated to the memory of
my mother, HELEN ROZAN SMOOT
(1918–2002), who was my greatest teacher.

Introduction

One of my most memorable moments in preparing this book occurred during my interview with Arthur Lane, a retired fencing teacher in his nineties. In response to one of my questions, he instructed me to pick up a fencing foil. He cradled my hands in his and adjusted my grip. Then he had me move the foil this way and that, explaining why this grip was the best, and I understood in both my hand and my mind that it was. The understanding was embodied, literally. When he removed his hands, I could still feel their touch. The lesson lingered as a physical sensation.

That moment is emblematic of what I have come to think of as the education triad: the teacher, the student, and that which passes between them. But what passes between them? And how? What happened in my hand when the old fencing teacher held it and explained the grip? How does that metamorphosis we call learning happen? What do great teachers say about their teaching?

These were the questions that led me to my project of interviewing fifty-one great teachers about their teaching. I am a long-time admirer of the late Studs Terkel's work: his books of interviews with people about their jobs, their memories of the Great Depression, their experiences in World War II. My wish that he had done a book of interviews with teachers morphed into an idea, then an intent, and finally a commitment—I would do one myself.

Classroom teachers were a logical start, but I soon realized that teaching takes place in many corners of society. So I sought great teachers everywhere, and everywhere I found them—an inspirational group of men and women who generously granted me conversations about their teaching. Among them were teachers of first grade and college physics, teachers of firefighting, fiction writing, exotic dancing, brain surgery, and circus arts.

I did the first interview in June of 2007 and my last in January of 2009. Though these teachers comprised a diverse group, I began to see qualities that their teaching had in common. Not that they had a single way to teach—far from it. But among this diversity of people, disciplines, and styles of teaching, I found universals. More than once I heard a phrase only slightly different from something said in an earlier interview, though one teacher instructed first graders in reading and the other taught adults how to wrestle alligators.

One commonality is that they all regard teaching as not just as a job but as a calling, a combination of serious purpose and sacred commitment to that purpose. Lynette Wayne, a first-grade teacher, says simply, “Teaching chose me.” These are people with a mission, and that metamorphosis we call learning is their cause.

There’s the old joke about the person who, when asked if he likes his job, replies, “If I liked it, it wouldn’t be a job.” The teachers with whom I talked love their work, using words like “passion” and “joy.” Teaching is more than what they do; it is who they are, and it defines their place in the world. Several of the teachers now retired kept slipping into present tense when they talked about teaching—not because they wish they were still teaching, but because in their teaching they had been so deeply themselves.

John Faggi, a prep-school English teacher, quotes his former headmaster as identifying in great teachers “an authentic presence in the classroom.” I often thought about that phrase in doing these interviews, because the teachers with whom I spoke seem in their teaching to be so deeply in their element. They have not always felt so from the beginning of their careers, but when they remember their first years of teaching, they realize that what they acquired over time was that sense of belonging in the classroom.

This authentic presence is important because the teaching triad is fundamentally a human relationship—in all of its multi-layered depth, complexity, richness, and challenge. Every act of learning involves a change in the learner. Acquiring a fact is a small change; learning to act, to perform surgery, or to be a soldier or a writer is a larger transformation. The student who once did not understand poetry but now loves it is a new person. To allow oneself to be taught—to be changed—requires trust. The teacher must be deeply authentic in the classroom because that authenticity is the basis of trust.

A central building block of trust is care. These teachers spoke of their care for students and of the importance of students’ knowing they care. Teachers care about their students as people, and they care that they learn. Such care is not just a feeling or a wish. “Care,” like “love,” is an active verb; it manifests itself in the long hours and great effort that these teachers devote to what they do—from a middle-school phys-ed teacher’s “toe talks” to students (she talks to them about their behavior while they look at their toes), to a philosophy professor’s great effort in making his lectures clear. The triad is the teacher, the student, and that which passes between them; and what passes between them both constitutes and depends upon a human relationship. The teacher’s care is the current that carries what passes between them. Teachers think about students, ponder them, observe them carefully, and try to determine what they need. In teaching other teachers at the FBI Academy, Kathy Mitchell says that her first principle of teaching is that “it has to be about the student.” When asked to account for his success in teaching both undergrads and medical students, a world-renowned neurosurgeon says, “I connect.”

Great teachers have a sense of their students as individuals, and they know that each individual learner is unique. One inherent challenge of teaching is that

it is usually done in groups, and yet the teacher has to know students individually, and to understand their inevitably different ways of learning. The teacher also needs to recognize possibilities in each student that may not be apparent. Fourth-grade teacher Steven Levy says he used to pray “to always see what is the genius in each child that makes him or her absolutely unique.”

Great teachers have humility in knowing that they serve a purpose larger than themselves. Even when I interviewed teachers in whom I detected a touch of ego—though they were few—it was clear that they leave their egos behind when they teach. Nor did I find anyone who cultivated disciples. What the teacher ultimately gives to students is the ability to make their own way forward. Pastry chef Dieter Schorner wants his students to be better than he. More than once, my conversations with these teachers called to mind the words of the great Haiku master Basho: “Don’t follow in the footsteps of the old poets; seek what they sought.”

These teachers are not only passionate about their students but also about the content they teach. Vince Dunn is passionate about understanding fires: he investigates them, studies them, and writes books about them. Paul Karafiol believes that math is beautiful. Suki Schorer does not just teach ballet; she has written a book on Balanchine. Many others spoke of their passionate love for their subject matter—from physics to circus arts. Teaching does not so much complement their expertise as it completes it. For them, knowing a subject fully is being able to teach it.

The great empiricist philosophers of the eighteenth century believed that the mind was empty at birth, later filled by experience. For John Locke, the mind was a “blank slate”; for David Hume, “an empty cupboard.” But that’s not the way Ron Washington teaches major leaguers to play the infield. “I never just put it in you,” he says. And exotic dance teacher Catherine Rose tells her students, “This is inside of you.” The teachers with whom I spoke do believe that knowledge is transferred, but for all of them, what is transferred between teacher and student in the education triad goes beyond information.

Kant studied those eighteenth-century empiricists and concluded that the mind was no mere passive receptor but an active organizing agent, giving understandable form to sensory input. In this way, these teachers seem to be Kantians—or post-Kantians. They believe that they are not so much imparting information as teaching ways of thinking, modes of awareness, and habits of mind. They are developing abilities already present, actualizing potential already there.

In the Platonic dialog *Meno*, Socrates teaches a slave boy the Pythagorean theorem not by stating it, but by asking questions that elicit from the boy geometric insights, through which he discovers the theorem for himself. Basketball teacher Tom Nordland says simply, “What sabotages learning is to give answers.” And corporate consultant Michael Ansa says the most important element of his teaching is asking good questions. The name most often invoked by these teachers is Socrates.

Many teachers speak of engaging their students in *doing*. In teaching women executives, Hannah Riley Bowles uses the case study method to draw the women into mock scenarios. Steven Levy taught the curriculum to his fourth graders by

having them make bread (beginning with growing the wheat), and he now teaches interactive techniques to other teachers. Physics professor Eric Mazur says, “Learning is not a spectator sport.”

All of this calls to mind Confucius: “I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand.” No one I spoke with quoted this or mentioned Confucius, but many of them live his wisdom in their teaching.

And yet, we should not be too hasty. In my twenty-two years as a student, the best teacher I ever had—also interviewed in this book—merely lectures. But these “mere” lectures were cathedrals built of language, rendering the best philosophies of the ages with a clarity that made them beautiful. While some dismiss lectures as passive learning, can “passive” be a true description for what occurs in a mind rocked to its core by what it hears? While teachers make thoughtful choices about their techniques, teaching is never reducible to technique, and while dull lectures abound, there are also teachers who can raise the lecture to such an art that the receptive student, hearing such a lecture, is forever transformed, as four decades ago the philosophy lectures of William Gass transformed me.

Teachers teach more than the subject they teach. They also teach meta-lessons, and while facts may fade from memory, something deeper often remains: the form of what the student learned, the excitement of thinking beyond the given, the means by which he or she learned, or the passion the teacher felt. When the dates, the chemical formulas, or the names of characters fade, it is these deeper lessons that remain.

The education triad exists in objective time, in *chronos*, but it has its own temporality, its *kairos*. There are periods of slow and steady learning. There are periods of no learning. There is drill and repetition. And there are lightning flashes of understanding—the “aha” moments of which many teachers spoke. The slow and steady periods are hard work, for both students and teachers, and the teachers know it. Suki Schorer’s ballet students must acquire strength and muscle memory. It does not happen fast. Nor should it. Arthur Lane, the fencing teacher, says “speed is the enemy of learning.”

So teaching requires patience, not just in the sense most people assume—of remaining calm when a student misbehaves or persistent with a student who is slow to “get it”—but patience in the sense of being wise about the nature of time. Great teachers know that each moment is part of a larger journey, a journey drawing from the deep past and stretching far into a future largely unknown. Teaching is an act of faith in the future, a high-stakes wager. The fireman and the drill sergeant know that how they teach may save—or cost—lives. The photography teacher hopes his efforts will bring art into a student’s daily existence and—in a different way—lives are at stake there, too.

Great teachers are natural curriculum designers. They are not only experts in their subject areas, they also have a keen sense of what is more important and what is less: what elements are most essential, how to divide learning into steps, and how to present those steps in a sequence. Those public schools that have taken course

design out of the hands of teachers have degraded the education triad, and, in those circumstances, some of the best teachers have fled to charter or private schools where they are allowed to function fully as teachers, not as delivery boys for a pre-packaged curriculum.

Great teachers have a quiet confidence in what they do, a solid sense of their purpose and how they are pursuing it. And while they are contemporary in that there is little new that escapes their awareness, and while they are distinctive for retaining at any age a vibrant spirit of youth, they are never trendy, and when they talked about their teaching, I was struck by the absence of educational jargon or buzzwords. Such words seem particular to administrators and educational spectators who do not teach. And when these teachers use technology, it is with the attitude that technology is no more than a tool. First-grade teacher Lynette Wayne doubts she would miss her interactive white board if it were taken away, and her common-sense conclusion is that “technology is no better than the teacher who uses it.”

I came of age during the sixties. Having grown up in a small town, a Boy Scout, a son of a World War II veteran, I went off to college believing that America stood for truth and justice. Like many of my generation, I was deeply affected by the war in Vietnam and the lies by which the government defended it, by corporate exploitation, by our clandestine undermining of governments around the world, by the assassinations of our noblest voices for change, and finally by the moral sleaze of Watergate. These eroded my faith in my country and left me with an angry sense of betrayal that would remain for decades. I joined the movement to change things, but our successes seemed outweighed by our failures. But interviewing these fifty-one great teachers, coinciding with a season of changing political leadership in America, gave me a pride in these teachers and a belief in America greater than any I’ve felt since I was a student in high school. Theirs is indeed a fierce humanity, and, experiencing it, I have felt inspired and filled with hope by the importance and the value of what they do.

In my conversation with Rhodessa Jones, a vibrant, soulful, and charismatic performance artist who teaches incarcerated women, she observes, “If we can really be present, then we can go anywhere.” Her wisdom reminds us of the precious promise of the teaching triad for the country and the world. It may also explain why, at the end of these conversations with great teachers, I was left with a sense that the triad of teaching is both elemental and miraculous. It is elemental as carbon is elemental to life—foundational and necessary. It is through teaching that knowledge, skill, and wisdom are passed from one person to another, one generation to another. Through teaching, the knowledge that elevates the level of our humanity is preserved, built upon, expanded, and reborn. We ask what makes us human: That we grow our food? Build our shelter? Make art? Wage war? Practice religion? Whatever it is, it gets taught.

Teaching is also miraculous. It is not a miracle of the rare sort, like a weeping statue or a person who survived a hundred-foot fall, but miraculous as creation always is, like the germination of a seed or the birth of a child. Someone did not

understand, and then the teacher came; something passed between them, and now that someone does understand. The teaching triad is the daily miracle: teacher, student, and that which passes between them.

Conversations
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Great Teachers

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1

*Teaching
in the
School Room*

“Good teachers have to have a sense of where they are.”

John Faggi

PREP-SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER

John Faggi has taught English for over twenty years at the College Preparatory School in Oakland, California, one of the preeminent private high schools on the West Coast. Graduates from those years frequently identify him as their best and most memorable high-school teacher.

He attended Andover as a scholarship student and later received his BA from Princeton and his MA from Harvard. After serving in the Peace Corps, he taught at the Athenian School in Danville, California, and at Choate.

What do you really teach?

What I hope to teach is pleasure. Maybe it's because I am at a school where the kids are pretty able, but I think the teaching of skills is really secondary. It just happens with the work they have to do.

What I just want them to do is really see how literature is a way to enjoy life, and to live a better life, because they're more sensitive to feelings and ideas and the depth of life—you know, as T. S. Eliot said about Dante, the “heights and depths of human emotion.” And when Holden [*Holden Caulfield is the narrator in Salinger's The Catcher in the Rye*] is watching Phoebe go around and around on the carousel and he's crying, that moment is . . . teaching literature is filled with moments like that, in which life stops and we can look at it.

What I really love is when kids at any skill level seem to have a fire lit under them and get excited about something and love it and really enjoy it. I love it when they come into class wanting to say something, wanting to ask something about what we have read—something that isn't about getting a good grade, that isn't about how to write the five-paragraph essay. The older I get, the more bored I am with that stuff—it just doesn't seem very important to me. Sometimes I think I don't teach certain things as well as I should because I don't think they're very important.

So I want the kids to enjoy and appreciate and find pleasure. One of my best students ever reminded me of this. Liza is a TA for me in Partners [*a summer program to give an academic boost to middle-school-aged underserved students*]. When my Partners students were discussing a poem, I heard her say, “Well, what do you like?” And I realized that although I had put several questions on the board, I had