

The JOY of TEACHING

A CHORUS OF VOICES

edited by

John Cartafalsa
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Chapter 6

Teaching as a Human Event

BY BARBARA J. MILLIS

I recently heard a talk on “Teaching and Leading” given by Brig Gen (Ret) Mal Wakin. He was speaking to 148 new and returning faculty at the U. S. Air Force Academy during faculty orientation. Many of his points resonated with me. But one of his opening ones really struck home. He said that if you are a truly great teacher, it is still doubtful that down the road your students will remember much of what you “taught them.” But, your students will remember YOU. I don’t know how many of my students do remember me, but my head started reeling with all the students that *I* remember after a teaching career spanning almost three decades. Ironically, only a handful stand out, but each one of them made a indelible impression on me—often for better or for worse—and all of them taught me important things about being a teacher and about being a human being.

Joe Lowman, in *Mastering the Techniques of Teaching*, focuses on the classroom as a dramatic arena in which human beings interact. I totally agree with this image. My interactions with students began when I was a young, extremely nervous teaching assistant (TA) teaching freshman (Yes! We were sexist in the 60’s despite bra-burning women libbers!) composition at Florida State University. Two students come to mind. The first made a comment to me about midway through the course, “Gee, Miss Baker. I really appreciate how nicely you dress for this class.” I was floored because this remark totally shattered the image I carried of

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myself as a dowdy graduate student wearing only one pair of high-heeled shoes (beige ones issued to me as a tour guide at the GE Pavilion at the 1965 New York World's Fair). From that off-hand comment, I learned that students do not always view me through the lens I hold up. Often, they will have a far more positive opinion. The second student gave me the gift of self-confidence. She invited me to her sorority house to be honored as an "Apple Teacher." I attended the ceremony with tears in my eyes. I had graduated in three years and my former college roommate was now a senior at this same sorority. Sitting at the head table with a large apple placemat, I was being singled out as a professional in my field: that early—very kind—acknowledgement set me on the path to being the best teacher I could possibly be.

From Florida State I went on to the challenges of teaching adult learners in open enrollment classes at Kirkwood Community College. Again, two students stood out. One was a struggling, semi-literate male student from a lower socio-economic background. One day during an informal exchange on the campus, Joe* turned to my husband and said, "Hey, tell your old lady to give me an 'A' in her class." I was stunned by his apparent rudeness—"civility" was not then the issue it is now—and hurt by the apparent far-from-professional image he held of me. Only later did I realize that Joe simply didn't have the linguistic tools to carry on an appropriate conversation. The term "old lady" was perfectly acceptable in the pool halls he frequented: how could he intuit the negative impact such a reference had on me? I know that Joe did not emerge from my composition class with the tools he needed, but I came out with a new awareness that students will bring all kinds of baggage into the classroom—often unconscious, culturally derived baggage. It is our job to see beyond that baggage and to reach—if we can—the person underneath. The second student, Duc, was a young Vietnam refugee eager to share his culture in a strange land. (Iowa's sloping plains and harsh winters must have been particularly strange!) He learned of my husband's interest in international cooking and of his service in Vietnam in the U.S. Army. He insisted on coming to our apartment to teach us how to make Vietnamese egg rolls. As a point of pride, although we knew he was very poor, he would accept no money for the extensive ingredients he brought that day. Duc's satisfaction came in seeing my husband's clumsy fingers fold the delicate wrappers and in watching us consume with delight our first-ever Vietnamese egg rolls. From this experience, I learned to value

the gifts that students gladly share with their teachers, many of them far removed from academia.

When my husband and I flew to Tokyo in 1978 to join the Asian Division of the University of Maryland University College, another series of academic adventures—and life lessons—began. During this wonderful opportunity to teach enlisted personnel and their family members on far-flung military installations throughout Asia (Korea, Japan, including Okinawa, Guam, and the Philippines), I encountered the best students I have ever met. No, they were not the "brightest," merely the "best" because they were so motivated. Many of my students had joined the military because it offered their only avenue to a college education. They were *so* grateful to be taking classes on top of their military obligations. Two in particular stand out in Asia. I remember well a young African-American airman who struggled in my "Introduction to Composition" course. One day he submitted a paper that clearly deserved a failing grade. I disliked awarding failing grades in any case, but like all conscientious teachers, I felt the need to uphold "standards." But, I couldn't just slap an "F" on this particular paper because shining through the semi-literate prose was a beautiful paean to Leroy's wife. I met one-on-one with Leroy, trying to explain the difference between a grade based on a writing product as opposed to a grade based on the content. In my clumsy way, I tried to encourage him to revise and to continue to celebrate the depth of his love. The final result was still only a "D," but I hope to this day that he recognized how much I respected him as a human being even though I couldn't reward him for his writing skills. I learned, of course, that students bring not only cultural "baggage," but emotional baggage as well. We need to nurture the human being beneath our sometimes sterile assignments. The second student was the exact opposite of Leroy: a remarkably talented writer. Dell, in fact, went on to become an acclaimed novelist and film consultant. I rarely give "A-pluses" but Dell earned one with a humorous causal analysis paper dealing with faulty toilet bowl detonators. Dell was also an exuberant party-goer who sometimes let the "US Marine" element of his personality gain the upper hand. At an end-of-semester party my husband and I gave for our adult students at our apartment on Okinawa, Dell showed up after an office party already pretty under the influence. Before long, he was showing our horrified guests his military war wounds, which necessitated an action more commonly known as "dropping trou"). At that point, Dell's Marine wife, Margie left in disgust. (Margie, we learned later, was jet-

tisoned after Dell started climbing the Hollywood ladder.) Dell then turned his attention to the other ladies at the party and managed to infuriate Matt by his unwelcome attentions to his wife. Desperate to avoid the pending flight, I remember clutching Matt with all my might, feeling his tense body triggered to explode into violence. I kept whispering, “Matt, he’s drunk. He doesn’t know what he’s doing. Please don’t start a fight. Please don’t wreck our apartment.” Matt—bless him!—backed off, and my husband managed to convince Dell to climb into the backseat of the car with him for the drive home. The driver, a female Maryland teacher who fortunately had a sense of humor and a humane perspective, merely whooped as Dell periodically leaned forward to grab protruding parts of her anatomy. When the trio finally located Dell’s off-base apartment, my husband semi-carried him to the door where he fumbled for a key and managed to fling open the door to face the family dog. The startled beagle gave Dell a disgusted look and proceeded to back away! I’m not certain what I learned from this student . . . I guess it was to value the experiences—however unexpected—to which our students bring us.

I continued to teach adult learners when we resumed stateside careers with the University of Maryland University College. One of my favorite classes was an open-learning one on critical thinking. With optional attendance because most of the work was done—pre-WWW—at a distance, I met regularly with a small core of students who preferred, as I did, the face-to-face conversations. And, they were deep and rich conversations spawned by the divergent viewpoints of students such as a male African-American, a Hispanic female, and a white single mother whose two sons faced the prejudices of a mixed marriage. We explored a myriad of topics and I—and these special students—emerged the wiser for the course. Thus, I was unprepared for a session on critical thinking at a professional conference where a Black man rose and stated emphatically—and unchallenged—that no White teacher could ever teach thinking skills to a Black person. I was reeling, but I never lost my conviction that something magical had happened in that stimulating class. That was a lesson I will always remember. My favorite class was a junior-level survey class on Children/Adolescent Literature. A range of students attended, from English majors seeking an “easy A” to a Vietnamese day-care worker who wanted to read good literature to her charges. Anh struggled in that course because her language skills were limited, but by this time I had discovered the power of cooperative learning, and she was safely supported in a permanent learning team by three other adults

who made certain that she was able to earn a legitimate “C” in the course. On the end-of-course student evaluations I recognized Anh’s handwriting. She wrote simply, “In this class I have found true friends.” I learned through this the power of structured group work because it enables human beings to reach out to others in meaningful ways. Another student in that class, a 30ish female, seemed totally self-sufficient, although she, too, was a contributing team member. Only near the end of the semester did I catch a glimpse of her personal demons as her purse slipped open to reveal an unmistakable pint of gin. I never followed up with this student—I didn’t know how—but I understood suddenly that we can never fully understand the complexity of our students and their tangled lives.

After I accepted a position at the U. S. Air Force Academy (USAFA), I faced for the first time traditional-age students. Given my age, they were more challenging in many ways than my adult learners. I quickly learned that although these students were bright, their composition skills were also all over the map. Virtually all of them were motivated not to read *Hamlet* or *A Farewell to Arms*, but to fly airplanes. At least one frustrated cadet, a physics major, accused me—respectfully, of course, with an extra “ma’am” thrown in—of fabricating all this esoteric symbolism. Only one student during my seven years at USAFA took the time to act on a genuine interest in literature. Even though I could never convince Bill to become an English major, I treasured his requests for books by James Joyce and William Faulkner even two years after our sophomore literature course had ended. Our subsequent discussions were a joy. Thus, I cheered with extra enthusiasm as I watched Bill accept his diploma, knowing that he would be an exemplary officer. I learned that some students will remain intellectually curious despite the demands on their time. I am certain, also, that such curiosity manifests itself in a range of academic disciplines and out-of-class experiences. Another student was far less successful. In fact, he was a plagiarist in an institution that prides itself on a robust honor code. Michael was a student so enthusiastic—perhaps impulsive, in retrospect—that during a carefully structured debate on *Antigone* (four teams debating “Should Antigone have buried her brother?” and “Should Creon be impeached for poor leadership?”), he leapt up and joined the rebuttal of another team. I really liked him. But, just as I was experiencing the devastation of a beloved mother-in-law dying of cancer, I found clear evidence that Michael had plagiarized an essay from a WWW source. I then saw evidence of plagiarism in another essay. I finally discovered that Michael had lifted verbatim

from the Web his entire research paper. I invested enormous amounts of emotional energy and time preparing evidence, testifying, and soul-searching. It took months for the case to be resolved, thanks to the safeguards of a carefully constructed cadet-run honor system, but I learned that justice will prevail if we are committed to the process. I also learned that we can never know what is in the hearts and minds of our students. I was seated next to Michael at the formal honor board hearing and during a recess, I turned to him and asked what he had done during the break. He broke into an infectious smile and told me about his trip back home. He was not a bad kid; his plagiarism was likely driven by desperation and had nothing to do with me as a human being.

Being a human being makes us committed teachers. It makes us love our students even as they confound us, inspire us, and give us grief. It makes us strive to know them as people even as we can never really know them. It makes us want to be, as I decided after my first year as a TA, the best teachers we can be. I want always to remain an "Apple Teacher."

*All names are deliberately fictitious.

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