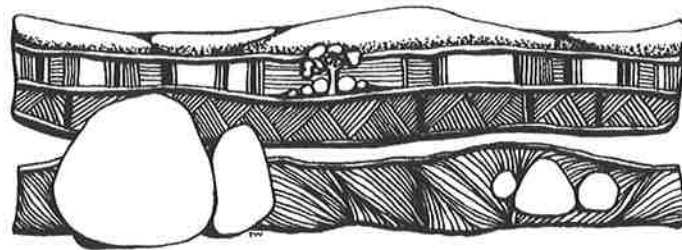


OUR VOCATION AS EDUCATORS

Gloria Durka



Living out our vocation is both an inner and outer journey.

AN INNER JOURNEY

Teaching is more than a classroom activity or even a professional activity. It is a basic human art that depends upon the exercise of certain intellectual, moral and spiritual virtues. To excel requires more than theory and technique. It requires the cultivation of certain moral and spiritual values that are indispensable to learning of any kind anywhere.

This is easy to admit when we ponder the response to a simple question we can put to others. If we say, "Name two or three of the most important teachers in your life", we will be quick to notice that few professionally trained teachers usually make the list. It is more than likely that people will name parents, friends, neighbours, spouses, siblings or other relatives. Then if you ask what each had in common, very few would name a technique or style. On the contrary, most will describe certain qualities of character – compassion, integrity, dedication, empathy, truthfulness, attentiveness and love. This simple activity shows that people know good teaching when they experience it, and when they try to describe it, they rarely do so in terms of technique. That is amazing given all the literature that emphasizes techniques over almost everything else.

When describing their favourite teachers, people spontaneously connect the vocation of teaching with the art of moral and spiritual formation more than with academic specialisation. Today's students still recognise some of the most ancient wisdom about the vocation of teaching, namely, that teaching is, finally, a spiritual calling. It is only on the basis of a religious account of teaching that its true character can be fully grasped. The religious

explanation of teaching strongly insists that virtues like piety, charity, humility and faith are not just virtues that help one to become a good teacher. The connection between moral and spiritual virtues to excellence in teaching is one of interdependence – you can't have one without the other.

Recall the famous work *Meno* by Plato. This was Plato's only dialogue on the subject of education. It features a character whose failure to learn is mostly the result of flaws in his character rather than in his logical ability. Through the main character, *Meno*, Plato shows us that when a student wishes to learn the truth, he or she must change. To the extent that that truth comes to *Meno*, he does change. He becomes less arrogant, more self-disciplined and more courageous, not just in his ideas but in his way of living. Moral and spiritual virtues improve thought itself as well as action. The implication is clear: the more we work on our inner life, the better teachers we will be.

And how will our inner journeys affect the learning of our students? Regardless of subject matter, grade level or age group, as we attend to our own inner work, we will see that our task is to enable students to work for the kind of human excellence that integrates the moral spiritual and intellectual dimensions of the virtues. St Bernard of Clairvaux sums up this religious vision of pedagogy in these words:

Some seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity; others seek knowledge that they may themselves be known: that is vanity; but there are still others who seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others, and that is charity.

AN OUTER JOURNEY

The inner work required in teaching leads to an outer journey as well. While inner work is a deeply personal matter, it is not a private matter. We do our work in community, and there are ways to be together in a public activity. As such, it is improved through practice and criticism. We can learn from others, if we really stop and think about it, we probably have learned a great deal about teaching from our conversations with other teachers, from sharing ideas and hints about what worked well and what didn't and most important, from noticing and observing other teachers at work, if only at random. While teaching is closer to an art than it is to a technique and involves a certain amount of mystery, we as teachers can recognise it, own its effectiveness and embrace its power and possibilities.

Our inner-outer journey as teachers allows us the great insight that we co-create the world as we live out our vocations. As Parker Palmer puts it, "we live in and through a complex interaction of spirit and matter, a complex interaction of what is inside us and what is 'out there'. The insight of our spiritual traditions is not to deny the reality of the outer world, but to help us understand that we create that world, in part, by projecting our spirit on it – for better or worse." This is both an awesome responsibility and a source of profound hope for change.

Durka G. (2002) 'The Teacher's Calling'. New York: Paulist Press Pp75-77

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*You have been trusted to look after something precious;
guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.
(2 Tim 1:14)*

*What is 'precious' in your teaching / in your role
within the school?*

How can you guard it, nurture it, develop it?

TEACHING COURAGEOUSLY

Gloria Durka



Facing each new class at the beginning of the school year or semester is an act of courage. But after years of teaching, the kind of courage it requires changes. Early on, we need courage simply to show up and face our students, and then to discipline them, to motivate them to work and to dare them to do better. The longer we teach, the deeper the courage we need. As we grow in understanding of our calling, we look at each new class and know that we must let each of these young people into our life in some significant way. The issue is one of heart. Can we open our hearts to thirty more third graders, two hundred more adolescents or fifty more graduate students? Put bluntly, can we love enough to open ourselves up to another batch of strangers? It doesn't get easier with time because each new encounter makes unique demands on us. Each situation is new. It is not as though we have been teaching for fifteen years and keep repeating the activities of teaching fifteen times. Rather, we have had fifteen different experiences.

When I was preparing to be a teacher, a wise professor told us to throw out our plan books at the end of each year. She told us not to be tempted to save them under the pretense that they would be helpful to us the following year. She stressed that each new group of students was unique, and all of our fashioning of curriculum and activities should be done to meet *their* needs. To this day, I heed her words. I am convinced that doing so helps to keep my teaching fresh.

We can learn a lot about courage from other teachers: for example, seeing how another teacher welcomes a refugee child; noticing a teacher's gentle tone with an unruly student; observing a colleague staying after school to tutor a teenager who 'just can't seem to get it'; watching a colleague patiently explaining a point

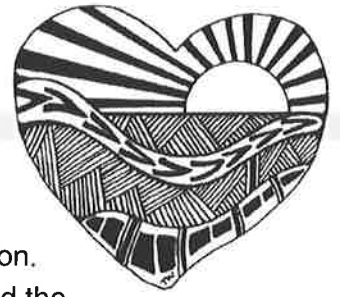
of instruction; admiring the even temper of one who tries to resolve student conflict; and admiring the fidelity of those who come to class in spite of a bad headache or having to leave a sick child at home in someone else's care. Where does such courage come from? It comes from generosity of heart.

Generosity of heart allows teachers to watch their students move beyond them, thinking and writing better than they themselves have ever done. We can admire those teachers who send their students to colleges they themselves could never afford and are happy for them, not jealous of them. Such teachers have learned generosity of heart; we can learn it, too.

KNOWING HOW

Can a person be taught how to teach? Are good teachers 'born', not made? Studies of model teachers have shown that sound instructional methods are necessary in teaching. Teaching without good methodology, without an understanding of what you are and what you can do, is like 'trying to paint without a brush and colours'. You need more than technique to be an artist; you need vision. *Technique* or *method* can be described as a way of 'doing' reality. This 'doing' flows from a way of 'seeing' reality. The teacher is one who brings a particular vision of the world to share with the students.

There are various perspectives to education. It can be regarded as a process of initiating young people into the ways of thinking and behaving characteristic of the culture into which they were born. In another perspective, it is the development of a person from innocence to experience, from the limitations of childish immediacies to the open possibilities of conceptual thought. In yet another, it is the effort of a community to recreate itself with the rise of each new generation and to perpetuate itself in historic time.



No matter how a teacher regards education, the primary task is to teach the young how to know. Schools have traditionally been understood as places where knowledge is transmitted, where children are exposed to views of the world accepted by their culture and where beliefs and truths are taught. Students are more than 'human resources' for greater productivity and economic gain. They come to us with questions and frustrations, dreams and anxieties, hopes and fears. Some are restless; others appear blank. We find ourselves daring them to break with their given views, that which is taken for granted – to move toward what might be, what is not yet, what is possible. How can our methods serve such a purpose? One thing is clear: No matter how polished a method is, it will accomplish nothing without someone to use it – one who is just as active, interested, engaged and curious about the reasoning behind a method as about the steps it contains.

Our sense of vocation brings methods of teaching to life and renders them in the service of life. Methodology is not just a way to socialise students into a way of life, keep them under control or pass along information. Knowing the subject matter well is also not enough to guarantee effective teaching. A teacher's sense of vocation is related to his or her commitment to intellectual self-improvement and subsequently to that of their students. Vocation without skill is ineffective, but skills without a sense of service can be superficial.

PASSION FOR THE POSSIBLE

How are we to serve our students in their quest for a meaningful life? How can we provide the means for them to live in peace amidst diversity? The world is broken in so many places with shattered communities and lives. For starters, we can believe that it is possible to move the young from *what is* to *what is not yet*.

Such belief requires a good measure of passion. Passion has been called the *power* of possibility. This is so because it is the source of our interests and our purposes that signifies mood, emotion, desire – modes of grasping the appearance of things. It is a way of recognising possibility, 'the presence of the future as that which is lacking and that which, by its very absence, reveals reality'. We need to nourish our own sense of the possible. A good place to begin is to reflect on our own attitude toward taking risks.

Are we willing to try something new, to experiment, to try out a new idea? Or are we more prone to choose what has worked for us before or something that others have already done? Do we need to have control more than adventure? Some writers on education contrast *objective knowledge* with *primitive knowledge*. With objective knowledge we try to own and control reality, and by so doing we turn everything, including nature and human beings, into objective things.

Primitive knowledge is based on feeling, intuition and faith. Formal education in our culture largely portrays the self as *knower* and the world as *known*. Knowledge is derived from 'facts' and the process of education consists in 'finding the facts'. Such a separation of knower and known, learner and the material to be learned, is now seriously questioned. Philosophers of science, for example, suggest that every scientific finding is a mixture of the objective and subjective. In other words, the very notion of *truth* is being refined. Parker Palmer points out that the word *truth* is derived from a Germanic root that gives rise to our word *troth*, as in the ancient vow 'I pledge my troth'. He says, "With this word one person enters a covenant with another, a pledge to engage in a mutually accountable and transforming relationship, a relationship forged of trust and faith in the face of unknowable risks." If we shape



our classrooms by this understanding of truth, we can gather facts, share knowledge and test different interpretations against one another. The conflicts that result will allow fuller knowledge to come out. The classroom is formed by the truth that emerges from the interdependence of the knowers and the subject matter.

When we regard teaching as a 'dance' between the knowers and the material, it is easier to rethink our own roles. First, it becomes clearer that we are to create a space in which truth is neither suppressed nor merely accepted. The focus is not on instant answers but rather on adventure, wrestling with untruth, silence and listening. Palmer calls this atmosphere *hospitality*, "where everyone is accepted, when one can expose ignorance, express feelings, try out new hypotheses, challenge other ideas and engage in mutual criticism".

Second, we are responsible for maintaining contact with the transcendent centre that calls into being and shapes a community of diverse individuals into an organic, interrelated and mutually responsive body. In other words, by focusing on the subject matter (letting the subjects speak for themselves) in the spirit and practice of prayer and *meditation* and by being mindful of the gathered students and of the teacher, deep learning occurs. Of course, the developmental level of the group will influence this learning. But the goal is shared by children, youth and adults: openness to and empathy with *others* who are different; interdependence; respect for one another's rights; *internalisation* of authority; shared wisdom in the ongoing search for truth.

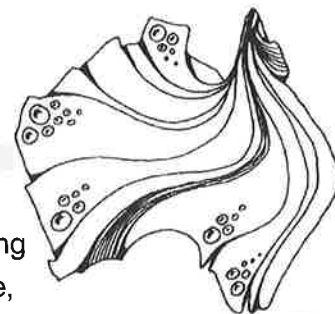
Certainly, in the classroom the teacher is the primary academic resource that is required to evaluate and document the performance of

students. The teacher (who is also a learner) is not the same as the student. While there can be genuine dialogue in a classroom it does not mean that there is equal power in it. The teacher has the responsibility for designing the environment and for guiding the process of education.

TEACHING BY DESIGN

What we do as we strive to teach with a *passion for the possible* is more than just shaping. As Gabriel Moran puts it, "all attempts to shape human life are reshapings of past achievements". He goes on to say that for a human learner, "shaping is of the human organism in relation to its environment. This relation already has a shape so that a teacher can only help to reshape what is given." Moran suggests the term *design* because it attempts to capture both the expressed intent of the human teacher and the material limits of what can be taught. For him, design is a more precise image than shape. I agree.

Shaping is a term that implies a pre-existing thing to be worked upon. The emphasis is on the thing or object. *Design*, on the other hand, has to do with an activity. As Moran points out, "the potential learner is doing something; to teach is to change what is being done". All teaching-learning is by doing. Aristotle highlighted this insight when he observed that there is only one activity in teaching, and it is in the learner. Across the whole range of human learning, Aristotle sees an underlying principle: "Men become builders by building and lyre players by playing the lyre, so too we become just by doing just acts, and brave by doing brave acts." So as long as we teach, we are students of teaching. We become better teachers by teaching – or at least we should! Teaching by design includes *instruction*. Indeed, instruction has a central place in teaching. It does not impede human freedom. Anyone who wishes to learn needs instruction. Good instruction is



precisely directed at the elements of the skill involved. As a student masters the skill, he or she will find ways to go beyond the instruction or to work variations within the instruction. But here is a key point: Instruction is a highly directive act. It is intentional and specific. So, as Moran concludes, a good teacher is one who 'shows how'.

We simply cannot escape that responsibility – we are obliged to instruct. For now I wish to stress that a passionate commitment for the possible does not mean 'anything goes'. Rather, it means that we intentionally strive to use every measure of creativity that we can muster to inspire and lure our students to awaken their own spirits. Consequently, modeling is central to teaching.

DESIGNING A HOLY WORK

In his poem, *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman writes:

I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul...

There is much to drink from the fountain of his work. His words in this line remind us of absence, ambiguity and embodiments of existential possibility. They call us to reflect on our work as companion-tutors, an ancient notion of how teachers do their work. The tutor, or *paedagogus*, was a slave who accompanied the student to school, sat through the lessons and drilled the student on the lessons when he returned home. Being a tutor meant sharing the schooling with the student and leading the student to the full meaning of the lessons learned.

Being a *companion* is being someone who nourishes the heart, mind, soul and body of those with whom we walk. The word *companion* comes from two Latin words: *com*, meaning

'with', and *panis*, meaning 'bread'. Companions are, therefore, people who share bread with others. The bread we share is the bread of becoming more fully human and thus more fully holy.

Clement of Alexandria, toward the end of the second century, described the work of Jesus Christ as that of a *paedagogus*. Those working in the Christian tradition uniquely participate in the work of accompanying students in the process of education. This education is not one that produces lawyers, engineers, computer programmers or the like. Careers, making a living, job specialisation are useful, but they are not enough.

This is not an education for anything; it is an education of someone, of a human person. Such a perspective allows us to realise that whatever furthers humanisation furthers the work of the church. "The church is the community in which intimate union with God and the unity of all people are demonstrated to be identical, because there the identity of the two is lived."

Whatever furthers humanisation is the work of the church. Instruction in literature, science, philosophy and social interaction, as well as instruction in religion, is directly related to the work of the church. Whatever makes us more human makes us more like God, whether we explicitly acknowledge this or not, claims the theologian, Michael Himes.

When we grasp this insight, we understand our calling as a holy work, and it gives us courage because we do not do it alone. Jesus is our *paedagogus*, our companion-tutor, during this education.

Durka G. (2002) *'The Teacher's Calling'* New York: Paulist Press

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