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My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

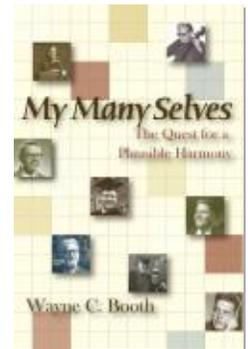
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Chapter Five

Ambition vs. Teaching for the Love of It

To go on preaching reason to an inherently unreasonable species is, as history shows, a fairly hopeless enterprise.

—Arthur Koestler

Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.

—H. G. Wells

*Delightful task! to rear the tender thought,
To teach the young idea how to shoot.*

—James Thompson, “The Seasons”

Oh, Mr. Booth, it's so good working with you—you must have had to learn things the hard way.

—Student at Earlham College, after a grueling two-hour private conference on how to improve an essay

*But where's the man, who counsel can bestow,
Still pleas'd to teach, and yet not proud to know?
Unbiass'd, or by favour, or by spite:
Not dully prepossess'd, nor blindly right;
Tho' learn'd, well-bred; and tho' well-bred, sincere;
Modestly bold, and humanly severe:
Who to a friend his faults can freely show,
And gladly praise the merit of a foe?*

—Alexander Pope, “Essay on Criticism”

The true teacher defends his pupils against his own personal influence.

—Bronson Alcott

The gift of teaching is a peculiar talent, and implies a need and craving in the teacher himself.

—John Jay Chapman

Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.

—Popular adage of my youth, probably quoting from George Bernard Shaw

My lifetime choice of teaching as a vocation may at first glance seem utterly predictable, revealing no soul-splits whatever. For one thing, the entire Mormon enterprise was evangelical, didactic, preachy. Our communal task was to change the beliefs of as many outsiders as possible, and our daily encounters were full of exhortations, not to say nagging. Being surrounded by would-be “teachers” produced my lifelong impulse, often absurdly overdone, to impose “truth” on others. Even these days, as I try to resist the nagging side, I frequently offend my family, especially the grandchildren, by intruding advice when advice can spoil the occasion.

Throughout childhood I was surrounded by a family of professional teachers. Family hero Grampa Clayson’s first job—except for day labor in his teens—had been as a teacher.¹ When Daddy died, he was already famous in our town as an outstanding teacher of agronomy. Mama had worked as a teacher to support us while Daddy got his degree, and after losing him she took the only open route: with a teaching certificate based on one year of college, she accepted a job teaching third grade. Gramma Booth had longed desperately to become a teacher, and she would have done so had her polygamist father supported her schooling beyond the eighth grade. Five aunts and uncles had been teachers for at least a while, though of course motherhood and other tempting careers deflected most of them after a few years of being underpaid.

I’m pretty sure, judging by how they supported me—in effect taught me—after Daddy’s death, that all of those relatives had been better-than-average teachers. What shocks me, though, is never having heard any celebration from any of them, except frustrated Gramma Booth, of teaching as the ideal vocation, as a beloved calling, as *the* profession one should choose for the love of it. They all seemed to have gone into teaching because it was the only available job. The pay was scandalously low, as it still is when compared with many

1. Like me he had suffered the death of his father when very young. As I said in chapter 3, at age ten he was removed from school and “put out” to work to provide food for his desperate mother and siblings. His stories about how it felt later to enter high school classes with kids four years younger were always touching to me.

far less important professions. (Just compare for a moment how much good is done to the world by a really competent, devoted elementary teacher, earning maybe fifteen to thirty thousand bucks a year, and an equally competent CEO who is paid—can't really say *earns*—millions and millions.) My Uncle Eli was paid sixty-five dollars a month as a teacher before giving up and taking a better-paying job as a clerk at J. C. Penney. Mama was paid only about a hundred bucks a month for many years, until her reputation and newly earned degrees got her hired to *teach* teachers at Brigham Young University.²

In short, teaching was often not a vocation but a fallback, a rescuer from utter poverty—a bit like how entry-level military positions are portrayed in Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Even Gramma Booth, while expressing her longing to have been a teacher, would say, "Wayne C., you argue so much and so well I think you should become a lawyer."

The result was that even though many of my elementary and high school teachers seemed genuinely devoted to doing it well, I never dreamed until college of becoming a teacher. Even the teaching of wonderful Luther Giddings and Gean Clark did not tempt me to teach; to become a teacher would leave me anonymous, unknown, far down the ladder. It would not get me *ahead of the others*, while to become a "chemical engineer" or "scientific researcher" might make me famous, or even wealthy.

Several of my teachers at BYU turned all that around. They were not famous—and never would be. They were paid poorly, just enough to "get by." They never said a word about trying to get ahead or hoping for a job at a better place. (One of them, Karl Young, a wonderful freshman-English teacher, did goad me to aspire to follow his path and become a Rhodes Scholar—but to him that didn't mean "to become a famous scholar.") They all had obviously found *the* vocation, *the* calling, that made life good. They engaged with me and other students in class and out as if that was what made life worth living.

A dramatic, unforgettable moment came when Professor Young invited about ten of us to his house for "supper" and then had us read aloud a play we'd never even heard of before: Ben Jonson's *Volpone*. We were totally carried away, astonished at our own ability to catch the subtle jokes. That evening was life to the fullest—for us and obviously also for him.

Such hours with him initiated months of debate about who I wanted to be. Karl Young and P. A. Christensen in English, M. Wilford Poulson in

2. What would that hundred bucks mean today, considering seventy years of inflation? Still only peanuts, compared with what you and I have been paid, right? Diverse calculations of inflation translate that \$100, in 1930, to something like \$1,000 to \$3,000 today.

psychology (and, privately, in Church history), A. C. Lambert in a required “religion” class that he turned into a really challenging course in how to do research in Mormon history—these had me convinced by the end of my sophomore year, when I was bored silly in my required chemistry course in quantitative research, that maybe I should be a teacher and not a researcher.

But what subject would I teach? If any of the really good teachers had been in chemistry, I’m pretty sure that I would have continued on in science. But the chemistry teachers, even the one devoted, attentive teacher, Brother Joseph Nicholes,³ led me to conclude that to teach chemistry for the rest of my life would be boring, because I’d just have to teach the same stuff year by year. But if I could teach English or philosophy or psychology, that would be a different task every day.

After long discussions with favorite teachers and, of course, with Max Dalby, who urged me again and again to choose what we all called “English,” I decided for it.

When I told Mama about my choice, she was horrified. Having suffered the underrated teacher’s role for fourteen years, she almost whined: “But, Wayne C., you’ll always be poor; and you’ll never amount to anything. You have the ability to become a doctor or lawyer or politician or . . .” Memory says that she went on to suggest I might become a governor or even president, but I strongly doubt that she went that far—even though I sometimes have dreamed of running the country.

What memory reports with great confidence—because she confirmed it years later—is my reply: “Mother, the point of life is not to make a lot of money or be famous. Why not choose a profession where you get paid for doing what you really want to do? And what I want to do is teach literature. Besides, I can make some money on the side by becoming a novelist.”⁴

As you would predict, my decision did not remain unthreatened by VainB and AmbitionB. Writing to Phyllis from Paris five years later, I speculated about the rivalry between ambition and the would-be novelist.

19 April 45

No, I must content myself with being a good professor, which I think I can be; I am capable of transmitting enthusiasm for fine things, perhaps even understanding; the creation of fine things seems, as yet, beyond me, and I’m not going to worry about it, very much. As I love you . . . it doesn’t seem too important to do something that gains “fame or my fortune.” There is

3. Oh, yes, we students all called our teachers “Brother ——.” Only one of those I had—one of the weakest, I have to confess—was a “Sister.”

4. If you care about “creative” ambitions, see chapter 13.

a necessary renunciation, not only of money, involved in the choice to become a teacher, and frankly, I become more and more willing to make that renunciation.

Then, after discussing other possible routes, including the life of a businessman,

I think of teaching as quite literally the noblest of professions, when done nobly. And life is too short and too final for one to risk doing anything but the very best thing there is to be done.

Today, when “making it” is much more dominant than in the Forties, I feel no hesitation in proclaiming unapologetic pride about that decision. VainB, AmbitionB, and I join for a moment in total harmony.

My account probably underrates Mama’s influence in favor of the choice. After all, though she saw teaching as what would destroy her ambitions for me, she had demonstrated to me from the beginning just how much a loving teacher can mean to kids—including me. I had witnessed parents’ gratitude for what she taught their kids. And AmbitionB had seen her get rewards for it; first she became principal of the elementary school, then was hired by BYU.

There was never any hint that to become a teacher like Karl Young or P. A. Christensen would yield money or fame. But was it all slightly tainted by AmbitionB’s desire to dominate in argument—to exert power over students? Perhaps. The actual teaching life later revealed many intrusions from AmbitionB and sometimes even from contemptible VainB. Why would a teacher teaching “for the love of it” be upset when one student evaluation out of scores of favorable ones accused him of being wishy-washy, of not “teaching any hard facts”? And what about the envy I feel “against” my close friend Jamie Redfield because he has had *two* Quantrell Awards for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, while I have had only one?

Fortunately, I find in my journals (and memory) hundreds of celebrations of the sheer joy of the classroom—including the Sunday School classroom—when things have gone right. Many are, however, a bit ambivalent, especially the early ones.

January 30, 1941

I am but a shadow of my former Sylph . . .

Today has been a rather mixed one, successes, discouragements, et al.

Professor Young had me teach his class in 1500–1600 English literature, because he had to leave. . . .With insufficient preparation, and with

his almost illegible notes, I carried the thing off rather well, I thought. They were (the studs.) attentive and fairly contributive. I didn't get my concept of the humanity-love-taught-by-literature put over too well . . . but I enjoyed it, and at least *some* of them did.

OK, a minor success.

Considered from a “professional” perspective, my new “calling” was side-stepped by my accepting the “call” to a two-year mission for the Church and by my later being turned into an infantryman for two years. What happened to the would-be teacher during those four years? (For the problems and miseries of those Selves, see part 2.)

Well, as missionary, I was actually teaching much of the time—not in any classroom but harassing colleagues, exhorting Church members and prospective converts. Though I never consciously violated Professor Poulson's warning, “Don't try to get them under the water,” I was often aggressively pedagogical, not to say pedantic: improve the world (and one's self-image as an improver) by teaching people to want to become learners. My journals often boast about this or that success in getting my “companions” to read this or that great novel or tough book about religion and philosophy.

Day by day I had to choose just how far to intrude into others' lives the “truths” I thought I had—mainly the truth that to pursue truth is one main goal of life. So the drive for learning and spreading what one has learned and producing a desire for learning more never collapsed.

In the army, chance presented some surprising opportunities for teaching. After about fifteen months slogging away as rifleman and typist, suddenly I was shipped from Paris to England to teach in a whomped-up “university” run by the army. It was designed to serve, or maybe one should say “entertain,” GIs waiting to be shipped home.

15 June 1945

. . . my bad mood is gone, because my immediate future is now more bright. I'm going to England to be an academic-assistant, whatever—in the army—that is. . . .

For about five months, in Shrivenham,⁵ a bunch of us lucky ones—actually now with sheets on our beds and no bedbugs!—were conducting courses designed to be *genuine* college courses. Since I'd majored in English, my assignment was to teach “composition.” For the first time ever I faced a class of

5. Not far from Swindon, not far from London, not far from Oxford. We did lots of touring.

“college” students, mainly indifferent, all of them impatient to get out and go home. They had chosen to be there instead of waiting somewhere else, but they seemed totally bored—at least at first. Only a small number were already spontaneously engaged with learning.

So what was I to do? Well, surely the task—never mentioned by my superiors—was to turn ‘em on. It was *not*, as one boss advised, to “get ‘em to write fewer errors.” It was to entice them into wanting to communicate more effectively.

I have no evidence about whether any of my students during those five months loved or hated my classes. All of my journals and letters stress only my arguments with fellow teachers and my longing for Phyllis. But memory sees me there working day by day, valiantly reading their “compositions” night by night, to get those guys to see education as a center for life.

The good fortune of those months continued when I was transferred to the occupation army in Bremen, Germany, assigned as the noncommissioned officer in charge of a school designed, again, for GIs longing to get home. I again taught composition, plus some literature courses, including one in Shakespeare. I think I did pretty well, though I committed one serious mistake: I chose to teach them *The Merchant of Venice*. How could I have done that in Germany in 1946, without ever a hint that we should discuss its problem of anti-Semitism?⁶

I was also assigned to teach reading to a small group of illiterate GIs. Totally green about how to deal with nonreaders, I had received what felt like a really focused assignment: teach ‘em to love reading—the center of my mission. They were with me only a few weeks, and my efforts were mostly futile. I lacked the techniques, and they lacked the motivation. Nothing would please me more today than the unlikely receipt of a letter from one of them proclaiming that I changed his life.⁷

Whatever the successes and failures of those six months of teaching impatient soldiers, they somehow confirmed my vocation. Though I was even

6. A German teacher we had hired had become a friend, and he did have the courage to rebuke me for that choice, which had been dictated, as I see it now, by the dogmatic “objective formalism” of the time. Ethical criticism of literature was not on the scene, and it was not until decades later that I faced, in print, the undeniable anti-Semitism of that play.

7. That comment is prompted partly by my having just read a wonderful book, *Life is So Good*, by George Dawson and Richard Glaubman (New York: Penguin, 2000). It is an “oral” autobiography about how Dawson, a black day laborer born in 1898, dealt with illiteracy until age ninety-eight, when he finally fell in love with learning to read. I can’t resist fantasizing: if he’d been in my army class, could I have changed his life earlier? The book has led me to sign up now to make a second attempt at teaching adults how to read.



Lucille and Mother join me when I receive my Ph.D. at the University of Chicago, 1950

more passionately committed to getting back to Phyllis than to getting back to education, my sense of a calling was clearer than ever.

GRADUATE SCHOOL

The first year at the University of Chicago did not—now to my surprise—do much to reinforce that passion. My teachers were mostly drillers intent on teaching us to become scholars, not teachers. And for them scholarship—a word I had never even thought of as a goal—was the pursuit of hard, demonstrable fact. The result? Well, a list, which I now choose to cut from an earlier draft of this book, of some off-putting, yawn-yielding courses.

I can't even remember most of them. Because I was happily married and living life to the full, day by day, no longer wondering what I wanted to "become," I didn't even keep a journal or write any confessional letters to Phyllis. All I remember is that I worked hard, got good grades, and read some wonderful but unassigned books, trying to catch up with the other students,

all of them seeming more learned, some of them still now lifetime friends.⁸ Fortunately, though I felt oppressed by my ignorance of scholarship, I still felt determined to earn the degrees required to get a teaching job. (The fact that nobody even mentioned our need for training as teachers—not only during that first year but throughout the next three Ph.D. years—so annoyed me that I later published a pseudonymous article condemning the department for the neglect.)

What saved my vocation was teaching in the “Hutchins College.” Having received “honors” on my M.A. exam—eight hours of writing on a couple of Edmund Burke’s essays and John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi*—I was hired by the College as an assistant instructor. I found myself surrounded for three years by a gang of genuinely devoted teachers, hardly any of them concentrating on scholarly careers. Unlike any other university college in the country, the College made its own appointments and decided on its own promotions and retentions, based entirely on judgments about effective teaching. Each staff of about twenty teachers met together for two hours each week to be “briefed” by one or another on the best way to teach that week’s readings. The recommended methods were often contradictory, of course, but most of them were challenging.

I felt that I was learning far more in those staff meetings—not just about teaching but about how to deal with texts—than I did in most of my classes. Though I continued to work toward the Ph.D., often quite discouraged about it,⁹ my number one goal for three years was to learn how to teach as well as, and cultivate close friendships with, the best teachers on our staffs: Robert Streeter, Wilma Ebbitt, Henry Rago, and a dozen others I admired.¹⁰ We taught one another in those staff meetings, or tried to, almost always with an implicit goal: Get those kids to love education and want more of it. (The goal actually touted in the College publicity was to produce “good citizens”—a phrase I never meet in any college’s publicity these days.)

What also “rescued” my vocation was encountering, after that dull first year of graduate courses, some genuine, rigorous literary criticism. Ronald Crane’s passionate revival of criticism focused us mainly on “close reading”

8. Hi, Homer. Hi, Mel. Hi, Norman and Mary. Hi, Dick. Hi, Walter. Too bad the others have died.

9. A standard joke on campus was that those who finished their dissertations took, on average, eight years; those who didn’t finish took even longer. My four-year timing, bested only by Jim Miller’s doing it in three years, still receives complaints from close friends who spent much longer.

10. Since most readers won’t know these names, I should explain that there are, scattered around the country, thousands of admirers of each of them: “He/she was the best teacher I had.”

to discover the formal excellence or faults of this or that work. I soon saw that when done in the right way—that is, getting the students engaged in the pursuit, not imposing your predetermined notions—formal criticism is one of the best ways to lead students into loving literature by discovering how works work.

Because of the importance of the formal criticism practiced by Crane and his colleagues, “scholarship” of that kind soon captured me, and I finally chose to do my dissertation on the “form” of a novel most often proclaimed to be formless, *Tristram Shandy*. So at least one part of the Ph.D. pursuit kept the central vocation alive.

AMBITIONB AGGRESSIVELY INTRUDES

Once I had earned the Ph.D., teaching half-time for three of the four years, my problem, like everyone else’s, was to find the right job. Where should one want to teach, even if an offer arrived? I wanted to teach the way people were teaching in the “Hutchins College.” And I was elated to receive an offer of a full-time position for the coming year: 3,600 bucks!

But then an offer came from Haverford College to be chairman of a new freshman composition experiment. Haverford was said by my mentors to be “the best men’s college in America,” so why not try it? “And besides,” one of them said, presenting to AmbitionB and VainB attractive reasons for leaving, “it has a lot of connections with the Ivy League and you might be able to move on up.” I strongly suspect, without any recorded proof, that the notion of “rising on the academic ladder” intruded at that point—plus a slightly higher salary (\$4,200). So AmbitionB and VainB dragged Phyllis off to Haverford, and I found myself landed in a setting of competitiveness entirely different from what I’d seen at Chicago.

There were six of us assistant professors: four like me, freshly hired for the new, wonderful program, and two who’d been there a while and had been expecting to be at the center of the tenure hunt. Without its ever being said directly, we all knew that we were competing on the tenure track. Two of the six were about the most competitive, egotistical academics I’ve ever met. As we gathered together almost daily to discuss our work, I more and more often found myself suffering in what I would now describe as a corrupting atmosphere. If VainB had not been so vulnerable, I surely could have refused to breathe that air. But more and more I felt flooded with anxieties about not getting tenure, not getting ahead, not being the best of the six. Contempt for such thoughts continued, of course, but AmbitionB and VainB too often won.

So even though I usually enjoyed the teaching, I had two years of increased distaste for the “profession,” combined with anxiety about not

succeeding in it. MoralB felt rising contempt for those, including my contemptible Selves, who seemed to be thinking too much about how to get an offer from the Ivy League rather than how to teach better. And at the same time I was troubled by deep ethical questions forced on me by having decided, during my army experience, that I was a “cynical atheist”—and one who still longed for firm ethical grounding.

So ThinkerB applied for, and miraculously received, a yearlong Ford Faculty Fellowship to study “ethical philosophy on my own.” We went “back West” for a full year, and it was while we were living out in California with Phyllis’s family that the conflict between AmbitionB, VainB, and my deepest vocation came to a head. An offer for a department chairmanship at Earlham College arrived by telegram.

I had already been *almost* promised tenure at Haverford, and I was obviously ranked toward the top of the six aspirers. Earlham was at that time below zero in national rankings—even in the rankings of Quaker schools. Like most of my colleagues, I hadn’t even heard of it until the telegram came. When I consulted Haverford colleagues about it, they just laughed contemptuously. So it was clear to me that to accept would be a stupid move, careerwise. So why even consider it? Well, the 25 percent increase in salary and the “honor” of being a department chairman tempted me to go and at least have a brief look at the unknown place, absolutely certain that I would turn it down.

After a surprisingly wonderful first day, meeting people who seemed much more committed to teaching than were my colleagues at Haverford, I stayed on to day two. And after day three, lunching and dining and holding prolonged animated discussions about teaching, I found myself saying, “These teachers care as much about teaching as the best ones in Chicago.” The four or five I lunched and dined with—all of whom later became close friends—seemed to have no fake aspirations or self-centered competitive drives. That took me on to day four, which took me on to a clear decision—my only regret now being that I didn’t even bother to phone Phyllis for consultation about it. (I did soon have to have an interview with the Board of Trustees, who grilled me about whether I would resist doing evangelical work for Mormonism. At least I didn’t have to practice any hypocrisy about that!)

As you’ve seen, LOVER (backed by VainB) takes immense pride in the decision I made: to leave “the best men’s college in the country” and “disappear” into Earlham College. I had found a place where no one showed concern for rewards except the loving rewards of teaching. And over our nine years there (1952–61), neither Phyllis nor I had even a moment of regret—except perhaps on occasion when Phyllis wondered what had happened to her career. But that problem would probably have been even worse if we’d stayed at Haverford.



At Earlham College

Chance intervened to make this choice even more of a triumph over VainB—in an almost comic way. President Tom Jones had told me that the offer included tenure, so I was freed from what by then I thought of as the Haverford curse: anxiety about tenure. It turned out that the president had been wrong, or perhaps just plain dishonest, in his “grant” of tenure. About four years along, a Faculty Senate committee informed me that I had *now* been granted tenure!

Thus I accidentally was spared those years of anxiety that young academics these days suffer; no matter how well they teach, if they do not publish a book, they will not get tenure. I was freed to do what writing I really wanted to do. I went on publishing very little, collecting rejection slips, but mostly freed from any nagging by VainB. Only two other Earlham teachers were doing any publication at all, so far as I knew, and the result was that I was able to read and write and teach with never a thought about how publishing might affect my career.

That noble choice of Earlham pleased Mama even less than my choice of teaching; she'd never heard of the place, nor had any of her friends. By now she was in effect ‘dean of women students’ at Brigham Young University (though frustrated at being denied the actual title). She was still worried about how to needle me into the right kind of career. On her first visit, strolling about the campus, the anxious sixty-four-year-old looked critically at her thirty-three-year-old “failing” son and said, “Don’t you think, Wayne C., that you are completely off the academic ladder here? You could be building a genuine career elsewhere, but never here.”

Again I lectured her, perhaps even quoting Jesus, on why we should pursue genuine vocations, not money, and she politely backed down.

Did I think about how choosing Earlham wiped out getting job offers elsewhere? I’m pleased to be able to say, not that I can remember. I felt officially committed to Earlham for life, and when Tom Jones said he fully expected me to be attracted elsewhere someday, I said, “Never! I want to stay here.” Even when the University of Chicago, responding to national praise for my first book, offered me a named chair,¹¹ I turned it down, afraid that I’d be once more sucked into the competitive scramble. I finally accepted a one-year offer as a visiting professor. The LOVER knew that he would want to go back to Earlham. (Some of my dreams recorded from those years do reveal VainB’s attempting, rather hopelessly, to climb a rocky mountain—and often falling down over a cliff. Some ambition was in there, somewhere.)

But within a few months back in Chicago I felt my love of that college totally restored (and the graduate department felt better than it had when I

11. Or what Phyllis called a berth, since it was named after George M. Pullman.

was a student). Different as the place was, I felt as much love for it as I felt for Earlham, and we decided to stay.

Haverford did not go away; it haunts VainB still, partly because I'm sure that it was not as corrupt a place as I've portrayed. It had and has many devoted teachers. But its image still sometimes produces teaching-anxiety dreams. Dreams about failed teaching have occupied VainB's nights from the beginning: texts forgotten at home, students rebelling, empty rooms, and so on. But I can think of none more vivid than this:

I have been hired back at Haverford to receive a glorious "named chair," the Franklin D. Roosevelt Professor of Humanities. I arrive at campus and cannot find the administrative office. Cannot find my assigned office. Cannot find a catalog telling me what I am to teach. Cannot find anything. Am totally lost. Finally do find a catalog with myself listed:

Wayne C. Booth, Humanities, *Latin*.

Holy terror; I'm assigned to teach what I know nothing of—and it's a subject that has been mastered by everybody who is anybody!

Earlham and the Quaker environment survive in me to this day. In fact, during my first year in Chicago, I returned once each week to teach a course, I missed the place so much. For a while Phyllis and I attended Quaker services in Chicago, having been almost "converted" to Quakerism in Richmond.

WHAT KIND OF TEACHING TRIUMPHED?

Since I could never think of myself as mastering some corner of learning that every student should be forced to inhabit (see chapter 12), I tried never to dump my learning on them or even to inspire them to pursue only my kind, but rather to inspire them to pursue learning in their own corners, always somewhat differently. From the time I first read Plato's *Theaetetus*, I had loved Socrates' description of his goal in conducting genuine conversation and loved his picture of himself as teacher.

His goal is genuine "Socratic dialogue" (of course, not his own phrase). He insists that in teaching, when you hope to stimulate genuine thinking,

do not conduct your questioning unfairly. It is unreasonable that one who professes a concern for virtue should be constantly guilty of unfairness in argument. Unfairness here consists in not observing the distinction between a debate and a conversation.¹²

12. Translated by F. M. Cornford (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 167.

His metaphor for the good teacher is the midwife. Though he often reveals himself practicing almost destructive midwifery as he probes others with threatening questions in order to discover what they have in their intellectual wombs, his claim that he probes them to produce *their* offspring rather than to implant his own puts it all just right:

My concern is . . . with the soul that is in travail of birth. . . . I cannot myself give birth to wisdom . . . because there is no wisdom in me. . . . Heaven constrains me to serve as a midwife, but has debarred me from giving birth. (150b–e)

Seeing myself as a midwife hoping to give birth to ideas I don't yet have, fighting off the temptations to implant something I already know, I've sometimes annoyed students who prefer teachers who dish it all out. One freshman complained to me after class because I had changed my mind about a poem during discussion. "My father is paying ten thousand dollars a year for this place, and you didn't even get it right!" I felt like kicking her out. A "classical" colleague once complained behind my back that the students I had taught in the previous freshman course, Greek Thought and Literature, hadn't been required to learn the three terms for Greek columns. Practicing as a midwife, I had of course failed to feed them bits of essential knowledge.

The practices produced by the midwife metaphor work at all levels most of the time, from kindergarten to dissertation supervision. But I think they work best for adolescents—those who are also ready to be impregnated with the desire for an education. That's why freshman teaching was always at my center. (Should I repress VainB's impulse to add that not only did I always teach freshmen even though it was not required of me, but I always taught *five* courses per year rather than the *three* my Pullman Professorship contract specified? Even as my various moral and thinking selves honor that choice, they are shocked that VainB entertains *mentioning* it here. That's contemptible vanity. Right?)

WHAT TECHNIQUES REALLY WORKED?

This is hardly the place to insert a textbook about good teaching or lengthy quotations from my *The Vocation of a Teacher* or even a bibliography of the essays I've published about it. I'll just offer a few key examples of teaching devices, habits, or tricks that have worked, whenever I've managed to keep my bossy self in check.¹³

13. VainB again has plunged in, even urging me to list the lifetime teaching awards I've received. But I have no trouble slapping him down.



Lecturing at the University of Chicago

The primary emphasis has always been on getting students to teach each other—getting them to conduct the kind of conversation that Socrates is talking about. This has meant a passionate insistence on having small classes, requiring students to become acquainted with one another quickly, and enticing them to criticize productively. Haverford had hired me to help institute a “tutorial” system that required all freshmen to criticize their buddies’ papers every week, in groups of three to five—in addition to their regular class attendance. I took that method with me to Earlham (my only real inheritance from Haverford except for our lifetime friends, the Gutwirths).

Did it work? My contempt for VainB won’t allow me to quote from innumerable student testimonials and, of course, the bastard censors all of the negative comments I’ve received.

To work at teaching those multiple small groups meant that in term time, my “scholarly” aims were often totally neglected. I got little writing done dur-

ing the teaching year because I was so engrossed in reading students' papers and preparing for the next day's discussions. So, you see, once more *LOVER* triumphed over ambition and vanity. If my mind had been primarily set on getting the next book out in order to receive an offer from one of the Ivies, I wouldn't have had time to teach properly; and most of the time I managed to postpone the writing to summertime or to the yearlong leaves that freed me to get this or that book done. And meanwhile, fortunately, everything I wrote was strongly influenced by what I had learned in the classroom.

But the discussion method does produce problems. Often I would have to hector myself before class: How can I keep George or Kashmilla from turning it all into trashy, unfocused bullshitting? That question required that I stop worrying about my own ego and start thinking hard about George's and Kashmilla's. How can I get them to take part in order to further real discussion, rather than to show off what they think they know? How can I get them to enter in a way that will take the discussion forward, rather than just in order to earn credit?

Well, one technique was to get their minds off their grades. I would tell them at the beginning of each term that their papers would not have any grades on them when returned, even though a grade would be entered into my notebook. "I hope you won't be thinking about grades but about learning to read and think and listen and write well. But if at any time you can honestly say that my keeping your paper grades secret is harming your education, you can come to me and I'll tell you the grade." I'm proud(!) to record that over the years not a single student ever came to say, "Your concealing of my grades is harming my education." They all knew that it was helping.

Another technique that worked was imposing dramatic shifts on the daily routine. If they are to learn to think independently, they must not be subjected day after day to the same lecture or discussion style. My tacit rule was to keep throwing them off balance, sometimes with deceptions that some would consider indefensible.

Examples

When the Nixon impeachment was thought to be imminent, I convinced my colleague, the nationally famous Constitution scholar, Philip Kurland, to interrupt my freshman class to announce a package of implausible events: something like "Nixon has resigned, but he has accused the vice president of committing all the sins; he has decided to sue the Supreme Court and has appointed me as legal counsel" and so on—a list of claims that any close listener would see were phony. After I had enacted my sense of shock and Kurland had left the room, I asked them to write up what they thought of those events.

Most of them accepted the account as true, and we then had a rewarding discussion of what clues they had overlooked and of what genuine listening amounts to. They then had the option of writing up their opinion of the “experiment” or inventing a similar hoax.¹⁴

In an upper-level course on rhetoric, where students were seeming a bit placid, I privately asked the one black student to help me with an experiment. Next day he arrived late to class, following my plan. I rebuked him mildly. He answered a bit sharply. I rebuked him more angrily. After we sparred a bit, I began to curse him, and finally he stomped out of the room and slammed the door.

I then invited him back in, explained that it was all a hoax, and asked them to write up an accurate account of what had occurred. A large majority reported that it was the black student who had used the excessive expletives, including “fuck you,” while in fact I was the one who told him to “fuck off.” His language had been utterly “clean”—though as angry in tone as mine. I distributed copies of all the radically diverse accounts, including one by the actor and one by me. Then we discussed not just why their accounts were so unreliable but whether they could accept mine as totally accurate; there were in fact a couple of differences between the cooperative actor’s account and mine.

In later years I’ve had students tell me that this lesson in how bias works, both in observing and reporting, was the most memorable experience of their college years. “I learned that I couldn’t trust my own opinions about everything, even when I knew ‘the facts.’”

Another “technique” is so obviously helpful that it is astonishing that so few teachers bother about it.

May 5, 2001

The real boost to my spirits, at 5 AM, was the flood of warm memories about the dinner session we held here last night for the students in my (our) course, “Organization of Knowledge,” “OOK.”¹⁵ I had planned the din-

14. The better students often developed skillful hoaxes of their own. When Peter Rabinowitz, now professor of comparative literature at Hamilton College, was in my undergraduate poetry course, he brought a poem to class for interpretation. We all struggled with it, and he now claims that I arrived at some sort of implausible interpretation. Then he revealed that the poem had been constructed by choosing every fourth word from an encyclopedia article!

15. Three others were teaching it with me: Herman Sinaiko, Bill Sterner, and—as graduate assistant—Adam Kissel (he also is doing a good deal of editing of this book).

ner, with colleagues' agreement, worrying about whether it would "work." And it did. Most of them came, and we had animated discussion from the very beginning, mostly in groups of two to four . . . really rewarding. After more than two hours, I called them all together for a joint discussion, and that turned out to be amazingly rewarding. I got them talking about how they now judge their choice of major field, or about the Chicago experience in general. Some began with sharply critical comments on their major field (chief victims: sociology and philosophy). But then they gradually warmed up until finally they were celebrating "highs" in their experience here.

By the end it was evident that they were feeling exuberant about the "party" itself. It was clearly the kind of fun they don't get enough of; I was shocked when several of those graduating seniors said they'd never before been in a professor's home or had any social encounter. . . . One effect of it has made me consider teaching at least one course again next year. Why not? Teaching is my bag, my center—or *was* until I stopped doing it two years ago. Why not do it again, now that my hearing aids make it possible for me to hear all that the students say? [In 2004 I took it up again, with another version of OOK. And just this winter of 2005, I taught freshmen again.]

One More Example

In a yearlong senior seminar for eight students, established as a departmental experiment by Sheldon Sacks, I was attempting to get them to be more openly critical of one another's writing. So one day I performed a trick that had often proved successful in other classes: give them a piece of your own writing, without your name on it, and invite criticism of the anonymous piece.

I gave them a draft of an encomium on the Chicago Public Library—the important role it had played in my life—to be published in a forthcoming collection of attempted tributes. Seven out of the eight said something like "It feels pretentious, self-aggrandizing, heavy-handed." When I told them that I'd already sent it off to the library committee who'd asked for it, all but one agreed that I should call it back and revise. After I had accepted their advice and showed them the revised draft, they proved much more vigorous in dealing with one another's drafts.

I am tempted, of course, to add more examples of my fantastically brilliant teaching successes as they intruded on my "scholarly" ambitions. But then, to be honest, I would have to add a collection of failures, and no room would be left for any more chapters. So—just a few words about setbacks.

THE NEGATIVES

If you consulted my journals about teaching, you would be surprised at how much less affirmative they often sound than what I've written here. Teaching is a tough job. You can't say about it what some Yoga extremists say about life or the National Basketball Association says about basketball: "It's all good." Teaching yielded so many tough problems that I often felt a sense of failure and *always* felt considerable anxiety, including nightmares, especially when my first classes approached each fall. I occasionally felt something like "The strain of trying to do this well, when your antilecturing method leaves you so vulnerable to surprises day by day—that strain is so great that you ought to take up something else." The journals tend to record those bad moments. They could be summarized like this: "Woke terribly anxious about classes today. Felt like faking illness and staying home. Phyllis easily talked me out of it. Classes went wonderfully."

The negatives were not always my own weaknesses. Since becoming a teacher joins you to a community—what I've often even felt like calling my "church"—it sometimes lands you into working with those you dislike, or even hate. Rather than dwell on those bastards (I'm sure they were not as totally awful as they sometimes *seemed* to me), how about a borderliner, Saul Bellow: my hero, as an author, but highly ambiguous as a colleague.

He and I often had good times, especially in the one course we taught together. A student came to me and asked, "If Saul Bellow agreed to give me an independent course with you, on Owen Barfield, would *you* agree to join *him*?" How could I turn down a chance like that? The three hours per week for ten weeks, just the three of us passionately discussing text after text, were a sheer delight. After that, Phyllis and I had a few lively dinners with Saul and one of his nonwives, and we both felt really rewarded by the conversations.

But quite a while later I see him approaching on the sidewalk, and I move eagerly toward him.

"Hi, Saul. How you doin'?"

He draws back, refuses to take my hand, and snarls,

"I'm never again having anything to do with you, never."

He starts to walk away.

"Why?" I almost shout.

"Because you misquoted me in that talk of yours last week, here on campus."

"Were you there?"

"No. But I was told about it."

He stalks away, and I never learned whether he was actually denying having made the infamous comment I had playfully quoted. It was some years before we spoke together again.

I'm glad to be able to say that memory provides far more moments of sheer fun than fully negative or ambiguous ones. And as you'd expect, that fun reached its peak whenever I received rewards like this one.

A handsome young black man driving on 53rd Street hails me from his car; he looks dimly familiar.

"Mr. Booth! You remember me? Hanford?"

"I sure do. You were in my freshman class." I don't mention my memory that he narrowly escaped washing out in that freshman year.

"Gosh, it's good to see you, Mr. Booth. I've wanted to come in many times to thank you for that class. You know—"

Pause.

"What're you up to these days, Eric?"

"I'm in graduate school. I'm in the SSA [School of Social Service Administration]. I'll have my degree, I expect, in 1980. And you know, I *know* that I wouldn't have made it if it hadn't been for the way you worked on my writing in that freshman course. I've told lots of people about that and I hope you're still doing it now."

He notices that I am pushing, not riding, my bicycle.

"You taking that someplace to get it fixed?"

"Yes."

"Well, why not let me haul it there in my car? I'd *love* to do even a little in exchange for that class."

By this time I am in such a glow of pleasure that I can hardly contain myself. Here he is, he's *making* it; his wife is teaching at a junior college to help put him through, and . . . he is now working as research assistant at SSA, helping to revise reports. And he might well not be there if I hadn't taught that course.

Is the point clear? Teaching the love of learning, learning with students as they learn with you, is one of life's—well, I want to say "salvations" or "redemptions," but Phyllis says that will turn too many of you readers off. How about just saying this: teaching is one of the best choices I've ever made. Pursuing the bliss of learning *together* doesn't mean that you don't let your honest negative opinions show when students commit errors that really matter. But you try to dramatize, day by day, how destructive it is when a teacher behaves like . . .

(The hypocritical tongue-biter—or why not call him Generous-Hearted-Booth?—dictates that I omit my favorite example of the abominable behavior of a teacher.)

In my own view—in contrast to Phyllis’s—I’ve usually managed to resist wanting to be seen as absolutely *right*. Though I go on trying to be as close to “right” as possible, as often as possible, my goal has been to practice teaching in a way that turns others on to the search for what is “righter,” as viewed from within their own souls. And sometimes it has worked, as I’ve managed to keep my contemptible Selves in fragile chains.

What I hope is clear throughout this rambling account is that teaching produces many moments in which you feel totally harmonized. You experience an hour or two or even more when there is not a moment’s thought of internal conflict. You’ve found one kind of plausible harmony.

But is that the harmony we pursue throughout this book? Hardly. A half hour later the splits burst forth again as various other Selves start nagging about the faults and failures of the LOVER.