THE TEACHER AND LIBERAL EDUCATION

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The white-hot collision of arms and men and ideas, terrific in scope and impact, has shattered or shifted the familiar landmarks of our minds. We seem to wander about as ghosts in a strange land. The utter confusions of the times have aroused men of good conscience and serious mind to scrutinize deeply the ideas, traditions, and institutions which in complacent days gave to society a measure of order and stability. In the domain of formal education the feeling is abroad that the colleges of liberal arts have been training youth to be little more than puppets in a passing show. Uneasy souls in the usually serene academic shades now realize full well that the colleges have fallen short of sending forth youth well equipped to be intelligent and responsible persons in a free society. Professional and popular journals have described in detail and with eloquence the frailties of college education. The professors well know that barbed criticisms cannot be cast off with a shrug of self-complacency. A few years ago a timely and telling report of the American Association of University Professors signaled a warning to its numerous membership that "slamming the college and college education is the almost universal avocation of the American people."¹ Discount the alleged deficiencies one-half, says the report, yet in all conscience "the situation surely stands in need of remedial measures." Faculties have turned seriously to the task of mending educational fences. Educational leaders across the land have met and continue to meet to discuss the constituent purposes of the college and to fashion measures to revivify liberal education as a vigorous disciplining force in society.

This awakening is necessary, opportune, and wholesome. One

is heartened by the strong emphasis upon principles and policies of a liberal education, upon fresh patterns and renewed devotions. Yet it is disturbing to find so slight a focus upon the qualities of the teacher who breathes into education the breath of life. No matter how masterly the pattern, how deep and true the intention, all will turn to clay in the hands of fumbling potters. Good teaching is not ignored, but it receives far less attention than it deserves. "The way to get good teaching," says the report cited above, "is to get good men. Hence the problem is not one of methods, but of men." Here wisdom begins. A group of eminent educators recently declared "that the application of any program depends ultimately upon the teachers who are available. They make or unmake the best designed schemes." It is the thought of Mark Van Doren that "the responsibility of the teacher is so great that a full vision of it can be crushing."1 And says Jacques Barzun, "August examples show that no limit can be set to the power of the teacher," and adds that "no career can so nearly approach zero in its effect."2

We agree with Mr. Van Doren that both present and prospective teachers should have good manners, but he goes too far when he hopes that "prospective teachers will have better manners than most teachers pretend to have." It would be unjust to subscribe to the witty cynicism of Mr. John Erskine that "a good teacher is so rare that the rumor of him spreads with the speed of scandal."3 Such comments do injustice to the legion of those who spend their careers and talents competently in the grand art and mission of teaching. And yet one must admit that there is appreciable evidence to indicate that all is not well. A group of scholars high in academic circles laments that "many of us today teach without conviction. We do not believe in liberal education. Hence our ineffectualness."

All great professions harbor a certain quota of mediocre or unfit and the professorial group offers no exception to the play of variable human factors. But it needs to be said that a responsibility similar to that laid upon the teacher is entrusted to no one else in

1 Mark Van Doren, Liberal Education, p. 169.
2 Jacques Barzun, Teacher in America, p. 5.
society. The freedom and accessibility of education are the crowning glories of America. Within a biblical span of life the number of youth in college has amazingly increased. Behind cold statistics lie warm social consequences. The widening currents of education have lifted the teaching profession to a central place in society. The purpose of a liberal education is certainly not to develop an intellectual aristocracy living serenely above the jarring and jangling affairs of humanity. The constituent purpose is to serve the individual and through him to serve society. And it is the precious business of a democracy to see that youth is educated in the firm conviction that an intelligent citizenry and an orderly society are inseparable, one unthinkable without the other. Youth is thus intimately associated with those whose essential responsibility is to educate them to be intelligent and active persons in a free society. The colleges fall short of the goal when their product goes forth with only a slight sense of social obligation. It is clear that much depends upon the qualities of the teacher. Great teaching and little souls go ill together.

II

A dual responsibility lies upon the college professor of today. He should be busy divining the quality of his own teaching. He should be conscious that he is the arbiter of the professor of the morrow. A few years ago a meeting of the Association of American Colleges took better teaching as the chief theme of discussion. The delegates warned the graduate colleges to awaken to the plain fact that "since three-fourths of their Ph.D.'s enter the teaching profession, they are in effect teacher training institutions." And, disturbed about the qualities of the doctoral candidates, they asked that the gates be closed to those who aspire to teach but "lack a wide background of intellectual interest and experience." Experience convinced the delegates that instruction in the colleges left something to be desired. Colleges recruit their faculties from the graduate colleges and the Ph.D. is the necessary passport to a faculty post, hence presidents and deans pin their faith on symbols. It would seem that their faith is not fully justified.

The charge that scholarship tends to be pedantic and pedestrian is of ancient lineage, losing little of its vigor through fleeting years. Montaigne illustrated the point in a sprightly story. A company of friends crossing the fields chanced to meet two teachers. One of the company asked one teacher who the other gentleman was. Came the brusque reply, "He is not a gentleman. He is a grammarian, I am a logician." And so, remarks Montaigne, "Let us who seek not to train a logician or grammarian, leave them to waste their time; our concern is elsewhere." The years reveal similar comments. Deans of graduate colleges of distinction speak whereof they know by their lamets. One deplored the "break-up of knowledge into pieces...the literal provincializing of learning," a tendency in great need of correction, "not the least in our graduate colleges." Another posed as "the first and foremost defect" the failure to develop a "philosophical spirit," meaning thereby "the interest, the poise, the sense of power which flows from the consciousness that the thing one may be engaged in doing is not an isolated fraction, but part of a commanding whole." A thorough study of recent origin calls the graduate colleges modern Towers of Babel wherein narrow specialization develops a diversity of tongues and shatters the unity of knowledge. So the Ph.D. goes forth to a faculty post, and trained as a specialist he bears the imprint of his professor who is a specialist.

The value of specialization through the ages is incalculable in contributing to the totality of knowledge which gives ever increasing fullness and richness to life. Highest encomiums go to the legion of scholars who labor quietly, patiently, competently "to quarry out of the bed-rock one stone," as Carl Becker so well puts it, "so it be chiseled four-square, that it may find its niche in the permanent structure of some future master-builder." Generous praise to the graduate schools for the admirable training of scholars well equipped to extend the frontiers of knowledge. But certainly what the learned doctors speak among themselves in their cloistered

1 The Essays of Montaigne, Florio's Translation, p. 131, in the Modern Library Series.
towers or perform in their amazing laboratories, what they write in their erudite monographs dressed in a language understood only within a special tribe, carries little advantage to society. Concealed within the minds and words of the experts it bears no social fruit. Interpreters must be many so that the knowledge distilled by the specialists is made applicable to better living. The supreme obligation of the teacher is to humanize knowledge, to interpret the findings of the expert that youth may understand.

Specialism carried from graduate training to teaching bears with it undesirable consequences. The teacher, having fallen victim to his success in his narrow field, becomes a prisoner of specialism. Moving within the confines of a little segment of knowledge and within a closed academic department, his vision is limited by a parochial existence. Bred in the inertia of isolation, he cannot see his subject as a single element in a balanced whole of liberal education. Mental myopia destroys the centrality of knowledge and breeds separatism within the faculty. Departmentalism is a cult deep of root and strong of fiber. Each group moves in the spirit that we belong to ourselves and not to others. Presidents and deans, so fully preoccupied with the factitious importance of administrative mechanics, so little concerned with intellectual leadership, permit departments to take their tangential way to perfection. We quarrel not with departments organized to give effect to the peculiar genius of a distinct intellectual discipline. The quarrel is with competing and colliding groups each concerned with patronage, each proclaiming its field of superior advantage and thus breaking knowledge into fractions. The time is at hand for teachers to cease their special pleading and agree to work together in good spirit to recapture the unity and breadth of knowledge that youth may set forth as well-balanced persons in society.

Teaching, like any great profession which serves society, derives its character and tone from the men who enter it. Sometimes we do not know wherein academic celebrity consists. The shadow of material factors sometimes is taken for the substance of life itself. A large graduate enrollment regardless of the qualities of the enrollees is proclaimed a mark of success. There always has been and always will be a fair proportion of doctoral candidates endowed with superior intellectual and personal attributes. And yet there
is a belief that the "area of accidents" is too large. A master in 
graduate training has remarked that the "problem of the doctorate 
resolves itself into the task of teaching weak minds what talent 
there may be." We refuse to agree with that sort of tired cynicism. 
And yet when the cynical spirit is uppermost one is inclined to 
think that all too often the patient persistence of a mediocre candi-
date is deemed sufficient to be garbed in the doctor's hood. "A 
crowning achievement" is the doctor's thesis, the apex of the 
graduate career, but often it is little more than a collection and collation 
of a heap of helpless facts strung together without bearing or mean-
ing and innocent of literary polish. A critic wittily commented 
that the transfer of raw facts to the dissertation reminds one of a 
dog carrying a juiceless bone from one hiding place to another. 

Not unfounded is the charge that a mosaic of rules and routine 
overlays the spirit and genius of graduate study. Formal courses, 
an exact number of credits, a perfunctory absolving of the foreign 
language test, a specified length of residence, all weigh more 
heavily in assessing a candidate than substantial intellectual at-
tainments. Some little souls with no abiding interest in the intel-
lectual life, with slight conviction that teaching is a glorious mis-
ion, covet the doctorate simply as a sort of union card. Symbols 
do not always reflect qualities. An exacting study of recent years 
forced the conclusion that "shorn of all trappings, the prime incen-
tive of the graduate student today is the acquisition of the master's 
degree or the doctorate, or both. Thus laying up a store of learn-
ing becomes to him of less import than laying up credits in the 
registrar's records." In this they are abetted by the administra-
tors. Nor has the degree been held in proper value by college 
presidents and deans who count the number of Ph.D.'s on the staff 
as evidence of great teachers when indeed it is only window dress-
ing to fool the unwary. The most urgent need of the graduate 
schools is to exert more sensible leadership, to place more emphasis 
upon intellectual competence, breadth of knowledge, and superior 
personal qualities in preparing the tomorrow's teachers of the 
youth. Much has been done to elevate standards; more remains

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for the Advancement of Teaching, by Marcia Edwards, with introduction by Walter 
A. Jessup, President of the Foundation, 1944.
to be done. Said one qualified to know by careful inquiry into graduate schools, "The ablest students will be admitted to any institution and will get some sort of training. The dullest will be rejected at some institutions, but somewhere a degree is waiting for them."

III

The whip of criticism has stung the professor to plumb the quality of his own teaching. The ideal teacher is hard to define or to find. The imponderables are so elusive that a definition of good teaching cannot be drawn within the lines of a precise formula. Various specious devices have been employed by some deans to rate teaching. Counting noses in a classroom is not a satisfactory answer. Nor does the response come in polling the passing whims and immature opinions of present students and recent alumni. The virtue in such methods is overshadowed by grave dangers. The teacher cannot well be left to assess the product of his own instruction. If perchance the class be large and the applause great, he may expand into the thin atmosphere of self-praise. If perchance professor and course are disliked, he may contract into a nutshell of scorn. Teachers should frankly face the problem of devising some means of testing the efficacy of their instruction. It is hoped with a heart of hope that faculties as they meet will resolve to chatter less about the trivia of rules and the registrar’s arithmetic and devote their time far more profitably to an exchange of views on the purposes of a liberal education and the problem of teaching. Departments might well pause in the profligation of special courses offered to pique the vanity of the specialist, cease to reckon success by counting the number of students registered in the department, and agree to discuss the manner of instruction in substantial courses.

It may be, as some think, that here and there the academic atmosphere fails to kindle a warm devotion to teaching. When the tendency is to rate the teacher of youth inferior to creative scholarship, excellence in teaching may wither when the rewards in rank and money go to others. A university not acclaimed abroad for significant creative scholarship surely stands in need of prompt
attention. But an undue stress upon publication at the sacrifice of effective teaching does not play fair with the numerous thousands of young people within the academic walls. The dissemination of knowledge by competent teaching is of no less importance than creative scholarship. The failure of any liberal arts college to give full and proper attention to the education of the young for intelligent membership in society does less than justice to the fundamental purpose of the college.

Publication proclaims the author abroad and he may be cheered by a call there or a promotion here. The teachers of excellence, usually unknown beyond the campus, hear few calls, and, often unsung on the campus, are apt to be slighted in rank and stipend. It is a fair statement that all publications are not of equal value. Writing to win promotion often results in a stuffy article by a piddling genius or a trashy textbook to swell the purse of author and his commercial abettor. The burning words of the head of a great educational foundation need to be seared into the minds of college officials. A fine thing, said he, speaking from experience, for a university to win acclaim as a creative and productive body “but far too many promotions have been made, too many salaries raised, too many relieved from academic chores, for research and publication which a very little inquiry on the part of the university in question would demonstrate to be perfunctory, unimaginative, unimportant.”¹ A teacher of great parts always keeps abreast of his subject by reading and thinking, thereby making his instruction fresh and vibrant. If his research and reading are embodied in an occasional article of significance, well and good. It may well be asked if it is reasonable to penalize him for not publishing when his time and scholarship go fully into effective teaching. “How often we who write little books and hug to ourselves little successes forget that where the written word reaches its tens, the spoken word, if it be sincere, reaches its hundreds and, radiating through them, its thousands.” So spoke a scholar wise in teaching, eminent in writing. When the mighty with power of life or death over a faculty refuse to give adequate recognition to men who spend their talents in great teaching, then much of the effort to infuse

new life into liberal education will amount to little more than pious intention.

Brief time has seen colleges of education rise to positions of power. Youthful exuberance led the educationists to believe that organization and device were sovereign. Bowing before the altar of techniques they could not see that rule and routine were tools and not ends. The value of techniques is not to be disparaged. The product is the end and the value of the tool lies in the skill of the user. In good season the colleges of education grew from infancy to maturity and presented findings worthy of acceptance by the academic teachers. It is folly for the teacher to scorn the educationist as an alien and a meddler and for the educationist to insist that he knows all the answers to good teaching. Far better to learn from each other. After all, teaching is an art of the most difficult kind. The mechanics of pedagogy deliberately employed deaden the fine art of teaching. The task is intensely human and should not be entrusted to those who have no love for teaching or the qualities commensurate with the demands of a great art. The virtues and benefits of masterly teaching flow "not from a course, but a teacher; not from a curriculum, but from a human soul," spoke Jacques Barzun with the eloquence of truth.1

Of the teachers of his day Montaigne said: "Of all men they promise to be most useful to mankind, but alone of all men they do not improve what is entrusted to them, but injure it." "Why?" he asked. "Because they labor to fill the memory and leave the understanding and conscience empty." Certainly true education is not to fill the mind with information and that alone. The facts and external manifestations of life are imperative, else all knowledge hangs in thin air without foundation beneath. But it is simply stupid for a teacher to act as a drill sergeant of information or to regurgitate from the desk the facts a student can garner for himself. The facts fade from the memory by the erosion of time, but what remains as a precious possession are sound ideas once made good by valid evidence. The highest good of the teacher is to make the facts speak out eloquently in all their bearing and meaning and thus only is the mind of youth invigorated by knowl-

edge. And be it said that it is a piece of impertinence for a lecturer to project himself between a great subject and his students simply to satisfy his ego as a learned man. The personal note is of precious importance. The great teacher must possess the humility of a scholar, the manners of a gentleman, and be competently but not ostentatiously learned, that he may win the confidence of his students. From the sincere and living teacher can flow a spirit which no book can contain or compass, a power to awaken intellectual curiosity and initiative, and thus liberate the mind and strengthen the conscience of youth. "The way to get good teaching is to get good men. Hence the problem is not one of methods, but of men."