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TALKING BACK

Caring Still Matters

"Teaching is an act of love" – Pope Francis

By John D. Lawry

The results of one of the largest college impact studies ever conducted appeared recently in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In a survey of 30,000 American college graduates conducted by Gallup and Purdue University, the most important variable that contributed to students' well-being after graduation and being engaged in their work was whether they had a professor/mentor who "stimulated them, cared about them and encouraged their hopes and dreams." This was much more important than all the other variables that might contribute, including the selectivity of the college and its tuition cost. What was shocking and disappointing was the finding that though 63 percent of the respondents had a professor who made them excited about learning, only 27 percent had a professor who cared about them, and only 22 percent had a mentor who

encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams.

The importance of caring teachers has been emphasized since the publication of the *Ratio Studiorum* in 1599, on which Jesuit Superior General Peter-Hans Kolvenbach commented in 2007 that in the spirit of *Ratio* "educators must grasp that the example of their personal lives brings more to the formation of the students than do their words. They are to love these students, knowing them personally ... living a respectful familiarity with them."

After the *Ratio* came a long tradition of educational theorists who emphasized the centrality of love in the teacher-student relationship, from Pestalozzi ("Father of Modern Education") in the 18th century to Jung, Steiner, Neill, Montessori, and Rogers in the 20th century. For example, Jung wrote: "One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much nec-

essary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child."

We have had evidence of this at the elementary and high school level of education for a long time. For example, David Aspy, Flora Roebuck, and associates dedicated practically their entire professional lives to analyzing more than 200,000 hours of classroom instruction in the 1970s and 80s and found that what Carl Rogers called empathy, congru-

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ence (“realness, genuineness, transparency”), and positive regard (“non-possessive caring, prizing, acceptance, and trust”) in elementary and high school teachers contribute significantly to classroom learning. The Gallup-Purdue Index Report suggests that student perception of teachers who care never becomes superfluous, no matter the level or age of the student.

As mentioned, the Gallup-Purdue Index Report has the surprising finding that only 27 percent of the respondents felt they had a professor who cared. And a 1989 survey of Girl Scouts of America found that only one third of the students said that they felt that their teachers cared about them. I know of no more recent surveys that challenge those results. Is it any wonder that some observers of contemporary American education have concluded that we are experiencing a crisis of caring. Might we now conclude that our colleges are also in a crisis of caring?

If there is indeed a “crisis of caring” in American higher education, what might be its causes? I suspect the answer is multifaceted: time constraints on the average full-time professor; lack of awareness of how important caring is in the learning equation; and a selective factor for cognitive over interpersonal skills in prospective college teachers. Aspy and Roebuck found that elementary school teachers had higher interpersonal skills than high school teachers. Are there implications for college teachers?

When I raised this with a friend, an associate professor in a major state university, she replied by email:

“Today, the reality of higher education, at least where I teach, is that if I want to be a ‘caring’ teacher and give each student who needs it individual attention I would be working 65-70 hours a week. I already work about 60 hours a week when school is in session and that is way more than I want to.”

Speaking from personal experience, I will never forget the handwritten letter I received from my English teacher at the end of seventh grade expressing her gratitude for having me in class and predicting great things for me. I will also never forget my master’s thesis advisor, Dr. Smillie, who complimented me upon my presentation of the thesis proposal while a grad student at Duquesne. He was very parsimonious with praise, but when he did so it meant a lot and served to convince me of a possible career as a college professor. He even volunteered to write a letter of recommendation for my first job at Marymount College



Tarrytown, where I spent my entire professional career. I recalled this recently when viewing the American Film Institute 2014 life achievement award to Jane Fonda. She told of how the famous method acting

instructor, Lee Strasberg, privately informed her after she performed in a scene in class that she definitely had talent. In the words of Jane, “he opened the heavens for me and I never looked back.”

What is this “caring” that moved Goethe to claim that it was not the most brilliant teachers who had the greatest impact on his life but the ones who loved him? This is how elementary school teacher Betsy Mercogliano addressed this phenomenon: “It is moving to have kids come back to me who tell me what touched them twenty years ago that had nothing to do with the class I actually taught. *They connected to something in my essence or I connected to something in their essence* [emphasis mine]. It helped them move something, shift something, hold onto something, let go of something.”

So how does a college professor go about showing care? Caring is primarily a feeling, and the behavior that expresses it is very personal. For example, I wrote elsewhere about a college professor who told me how she hugs her students both before and after her classes. At the time, I was teaching in a women’s college and immediately rejected the idea of hugging my students on any occasion except perhaps at graduation. I learned subsequently that teachers in the Waldorf system shake hands with their students at the beginning and end of the school day. And so the conversation should probably be about why caring is important rather than how it should be done. I think we all have to find our own way that we are comfortable with, consistent with

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the culture of the college in which we teach.

Some students need more caring than others. And some students may not think or feel they want any at all. I also believe that teachers may find some students more "carable" than others. I suppose it is a matter of fit and need. For my part, I found it easier to care for students who cared about the subject I was teaching as well as those who needed extra help.

My favorite example of the power of a caring professor comes from friend and former colleague, Jean Houston, who wrote in *The Possible Human* about a young Swiss visiting professor of religion, Dr. Jacob Taubes, at Columbia University, who saved her life when she was in the middle of a personal crisis in her junior year. Jean had

experienced several recent deaths in her family and was injured while rehearsing a college play, which resulted in impaired vision: "Dr. Taubes continued to walk me to the bus throughout the term, always challenging me with intellectually challenging questions. He attended to me. I existed to him in the 'realist' of senses, and because I existed for him I began to exist for myself. Within several weeks my eyesight came back, my spirit bloomed and I became a fairly serious student."

A former student, Christine, class of '00, wrote me recently about a course I offered in her sophomore year. For modesty's sake I hesitate, but I feel that it demonstrates the point of the whole article. Some lines from her letter:

Hi, Dr. Lawry,

It's been a long time since I have seen you, but you were and continue to be a major influential person in my life. At Marymount you exposed me to A Course in Miracles and ... other eye-opening philosophies that have remained with me... I was never the same after your course Perennial Quest. [Christine is now getting married and continues:] So, I wanted you to know that you are a true Professor – teaching and supporting your students to grow, think, and be. ... I'll always be grateful to you for that. I know I am often emotional or gushy, but you know me, Dr. L lol. I just never forget true teachers. Thank you... . Love, Christine

Lessons in the Wilderness

Student Immersion and Inspiration

By Bill Kriege

I do not recall why I went alone that day. Fishing excursions to nearby Swedetown Creek were almost exclusively accomplished in tandem with Randy, my good pal who lived but a few houses away. Maybe he had a dental appointment. Whatever the case, I could not resist perfect fishing conditions - light mist, calm winds, 60 degrees – so I embarked unaccompanied into the Upper Peninsula's

deciduous forest that grew beyond the end of Poplar Street.

Approaching the 12-foot-wide creek bed, I pulled up short to bait the hook, position the sinker, and tune the reel's drag. Since Michigan's state fish was sensitive and easily spooked, it was best to minimize time next to shore, where my prepubescent shadow would broadcast warnings to everything beneath the water's surface. Once sufficiently prepared, I padded toward the creek, just below one of our angling

hot spots. Starting from a downstream location would cloak my presence, as the current washed the sounds and vibration of my footsteps away from fish lurking upstream. I was ready. The familiar sound of water over rock and slate intensified as I made my final advance. I peered across the stream's small gully to locate my first cast. Then I saw him on the opposite bank.

His size struck me. I had never before seen one, save for one included in a taxidermy exhibit and those