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Thou Shalt Have a Calling to Teach

*Education is what survives when what has been learnt
has been forgotten.*

—B. F. Skinner

I became a teacher because I detested school—hated just about every minute of it, particularly from sixth grade on. By the time I was in eighth grade, I had a chair of my own right outside the vice-principal’s office. I was a teacher’s nightmare—the one in the back of the class making noises and comments to make the kids around me laugh. I constantly asked the dreaded question, “Why do we have to learn this stuff anyway?” My teachers would warn me not to get smart with them, which always struck me as a contradiction in terms. I would read every book on the suggested reading lists sent home by my English teachers but refuse to admit that I’d read the books. I didn’t want to give my teachers the satisfaction of thinking they had taught me something. I hiked my skirts up,

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ratted my hair, and sported heavy black eyeliner and white lipstick. When the vice-principal pulled me into her office to wash my face, unroll my skirts, and comb out my hair, I'd march to the closest restroom and redo the whole look. I was one of the girls who wouldn't let you into the bathrooms at lunch because my friends and I were in there smoking.

In my junior year of high school, my counselor called me in to "discuss my future," one of his minimum job requirements. This man had never taken any notice of me before other than to make big circles around my chair outside the vice-principal's door. He sat me in his office, winced as he perused my rather thick disciplinary file, sighed, and asked what I planned to do when I grew up. I smiled and told him I was going to be a teacher. He laughed, looked me dead in the eye, and said, "You'll *never* be a teacher." I got up, leaned over his desk, and said, "You don't know me," and walked out of his office.

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I'd known I was going to be a teacher since I was five years old—it was the only thing I'd ever wanted to do. Even when I was misbehaving in school, causing a couple of teachers to reconsider their chosen profession, I knew teaching was one of the reasons I was put on this earth. Luckily for me, I had parents who never questioned my goals even when I was at my most rebellious. Because I hated to sit still and listen to sermons, I volunteered to work in Sunday school classes from a very early age and discovered I had a knack for working with kids. As I began developing my own ideas about teaching, I was influenced by the failures of the ineffective, joyless teachers I observed as a student. I knew there had to be a better way, so I built my teaching career around engaging the students who hated school the most. In my classes, my students are rewarded for asking, "Why do we have to learn this stuff?" This shows they are concerned with their education.

I understood from the beginning I was not teaching a subject, I was teaching people. I believe my attitude toward school would have been very different if I'd had even one teacher try to figure out why I was acting like such a jerk. I was obviously intelligent, but they settled for stamping all of my report cards with the phrase "not working up to potential." Not one of them ever asked why. If they had, I would have told them I didn't see the usefulness or the excitement in anything they were teaching. It seemed like a complete waste of time to me; one of my teachers even said that high school was a holding zone to keep us teens from glutting the job market. Also, most of my teachers believed students needed to be controlled with a heavy hand; they never understood that true power has more to do with inspiration than intimidation.

I did the bare minimum to graduate from high school and paid for my obstinacy by having to attend a junior college for two years. But college was a revelation for me. The professors didn't care whether I showed up for class or not because I was paying for the privilege. Suddenly, my education became my own. Every class, every credit, was one step closer to my goal, and I blossomed in that atmosphere. Even though it was a painful time for me (and my teachers), my public school experience served me well in that it taught me what not to do as a teacher. For the past 20 years, I've tried to design classes I would like to attend, and it has made all the difference to me and my students.

Sometimes I want to deduct my teaching salary as a charitable contribution on my income-tax forms. It's a huge mistake to get into teaching for the money or because summers are free. Over the years I've known people who became teachers for these reasons, and they spend the money and the summers trying to recover from the physical and psychological stresses the students cause them. I believe you should become a teacher if you would do it anyway, for free. It's one of the hardest jobs I know of, requiring you to act as a gifted academician, psychologist, detective, magician, technician, supervisor, entertainer, and counselor all within a class period—and then do it all over again. My favorite thing about

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teaching is that it stimulates both my creative and practical impulses. I also love that I am solely responsible for the quality of what goes on in my classroom. As you probably have already surmised, I have some issues with authority figures. However, as a teacher, I am the authority and no one is peering over my shoulder to make sure I'm doing a good job. I am my own quality control, which adds to the pressure and the pleasure of my work.

I consider teachers to be among an elite group of people who can truly change the world.

Teaching is the greatest of all professions. I consider teachers to be among an elite group of people who can truly change the world. I call it the ripple effect. Some time ago, I was talking with a group of people who were in college in the early 1970s, a time of tremendous social upheaval and change. We were laughing about the protest marches, the campus takeovers, and the hubristic attitude that made us believe that if we handed out enough leaflets the world would slap its collective forehead and shout, "Of course you're right—why didn't I think of peace and love and feeding the children!" Instead, even after toppling an administration, it was business as usual. One person in the group shook his head at what naive fools we'd been, noting that not one of us had followed an idealistic path. I told him that I had—I became a teacher. Instead of trying to change thousands of minds at once, I influence people daily in a much smaller arena. It is possible that my students will raise their children with enlightened attitudes about racism, sexism, and their responsibilities to their communities. It's like dropping a pebble in a pool—I can't change everything, but I can help my students to examine why they believe what they do and to live a more deliberate life.

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If teaching were easy, anyone could do it. Teachers bear an overwhelming responsibility because a teacher's casual comment can become part of a student's life script. How many times have you heard adults say that a teacher's encouragement influenced them to change the course of their lives? On the other hand, I know several adults who speak bitterly of teachers who told them in third grade they were insipid, untalented, or a waste of time; these adults have never forgotten those words. As a teacher, you're not allowed to have such a bad day that you take it out on your students. As a teacher, you're a closely watched role model who communicates more by what you do than by what you say. As a teacher, you are remembered forever, but *how* you are remembered is up to you. Teaching is an incredibly important and demanding job, and it requires a profound commitment. The first commandment of good teaching? Thou shalt not become a teacher unless you feel a calling to this wellspring of all professions. Depending on your talent and disposition, teaching can be the best or the worst way to earn your living.