

Keynote Address: U.S.M. Russell Chair Lecture

“Spirit of Teaching” Conference

April 8, 2000

Abstract:

In a letter written to a favorite teacher with whom he studied in the early 1970's, the author struggles to understand the meaning of the spirit of teaching. In the end, he realizes, its essence lies not so much in theory or technique but rather in character and relationship.

A Grateful Student Writes To His Spirited Teacher

Dear Joe;

As you know from our lunch together in Baltimore last summer and the series of e-mails we've shared since then, I'm giving this "lecture," or at least a variation of that ancient form of public speaking, on the theme "The Spirit of Teaching." When I selected this topic as my theme for the 10th Walter E. Russell Chair in Philosophy and Education at the University of Southern Maine, I didn't quite realize what I was getting into. I more or less felt that "The Spirit of Teaching" would, in the least, engage a series of lively conversations among colleagues, students, alumni and friends. This was my primary goal because it has seemed to me that while we in the academy talk with one another about many important things, we seldom do so about this central and vital activity which binds us together as a community. I also thought that "The Spirit of Teaching" would set out a broad and generative enough invitation to yield a healthy number of workshop proposals to present at a conference I wished to convene while in the Russell Chair. These expectations have been met - and with abundance.

But I also naively thought that the subject of spirit and teaching would be a relatively easy one for me to make a speech about - this "lecture" being the one formal obligation that came with the Russell Chair. Afterall, I've been a college teacher for more than 20 years and before that had numerous experiences with other interesting and engaging teaching roles. At least I had this solid experiential basis from which to draw. I have read rather widely on the art and science of teaching, so I thought I would be helped there. And you know, from our long history together, of my interest in spirit and spirituality. So I believed

myself to be well-covered for the purposes of writing my talk. How wrong can a man be?

The first thing I ran up against as I had begun reading specifically for this task was a line from one of Emerson's essays: "Of that ineffable essence which we call Spirit, he that thinks most will say least." So there I was, caught in a trap. What could I dare say about "Spirit" that wouldn't indict me as a fraud? And then, not two weeks later, while reading a book about the spirituality of imperfection (in which I also have a strong basis in personal experience), I ran across this little story:

The disciples were absorbed in a discussion of Lao-Tzu's

dictum: *Those who know do not say; Those who say do*

not know. When the Master entered, they asked him what

the words meant. The Master said, "Which of you knows

the fragrance of a rose? "All of them knew. Then he said,

"Put it into words." And all of them were silent.

What is the Spirit? To provide an answer may very well mean one has misunderstood the question. Perhaps the best response, or at least the most honest one, is to follow the example of those disciples and remain silent. But then there would be no opening talk . . . and no conference . . . and no book following these events. Speech or silence? Truthfulness or deceit? A conundrum

that philosophers and teachers frequently face, I suppose, and have since at least the time of Socrates.

I shall take the risk and speak to you, Joe, my friend and teacher. And hope that you will listen, as you always have, to the words I say as well as the words I choose not to say. For perhaps, like Meister Eckhart suggested almost a millennium ago, truth lies not in words themselves or the silences which surround words, but in that sacred and mysterious place where the two meet.

I choose to write to you to work out my thoughts and feelings about the spirit of teaching because I see you as one of the best teachers, and most spirited, I've ever known. I don't know if you realize that despite more than 30 years of knowing each other with our endless and endlessly engaging conversations, exchanges of letters and more recently e-mails, and sharing each others writings, I had you as a classroom teacher only once. That was your course in poetry taught as an elective in the School of Theology at St. Mary's Seminary and University – Roland Park. It was 1972 and, having just turned 23 and earnestly pursuing the pathway to priesthood, the same path that you had taken, also at St. Mary's in Baltimore, some 20 years before, I thought I knew the direction my life would be taking. As it turned out that semester I learned that I knew little about poetry and even less about myself. I was in for an extraordinary journey in learning. You became my guide.

The first thing I remember about your class was that we sat in a circle. Not the rows of neatly organized chairs that had dominated my classroom experience up to that point in graduate school, and before that in college and 12 years of public schools. We students weren't looking into the backs of other students' heads. We looked into each others' faces and eyes. Yes eyes - which are so appropriate because the eye, as Emerson wrote, is the first circle and a shape which is repeated in nature without end.

Years later I recall our having an animated conversation about John Neihardt's book, *Black Elk Speaks*. One of my favorite parts of that book is where the Lakota Elder and Holy Man, Black Elk, reflects on the power of circles. "You have noticed everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles . . . birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours . . . the sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round . . . the world always works in circles and everything tries to be round . . . "

Everything, that is, except the world of education as I had known it - with its rows of students and boxes called classrooms and straight lines of thought poured from the full heads of teachers into the empty ones of learners. Until I met you. We sat in our circle and you questioned the presumed fullness in your head much as you asked us to question the presumed emptiness in our own. Our poetry class was considered to be on the margins of the curriculum by the erstwhile heady theologians who constituted the core faculty at the seminary – those former students of even headier European theological giants like Karl Rahner, Hans Kung, and Edward Schillebeeckx. But in my view your class was not in the least marginal. It stood in the very center of learning and meaning-making in what was soon to become a luminous and transformational period in my life.

We read poems and talked about them. Sure, you had plenty to say as our teacher, although you often spoke with a sense of doubt, deference, and even humility. Questions were more important to you than answers. E.M. Cioran, the Romanian philosopher and poet, once wrote "The fewer the solutions, the livelier the thought." Our class was lively indeed with thought. I remember you once saying that you mistrusted those who always seemed so certain of their ideas because your experience had suggested that, more often than not, "certainty" only meant being wrong at the top of one's voice.

The roundness of our learning experience included your belief that we not lock knowledge into separate disciplinary boxes but rather that each of us open ourselves to the possibility that many fields of scholarship could help us learn poetry. So you encouraged us to think broadly by painting lucid and lovely contexts in biography, mythology, history, and whatever other field of knowledge would facilitate our understanding, our standing-under the poems and their authors' intent.

I still have our course text, an anthology of 20th Century American poetry entitled *The Voice That Is Great Within Us*. Through that book my classmates and I entered more deeply into the thought of writers whom I had at least heard of prior to 1972 - Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams. And those into whose oceans of art I had not ventured even a single toe - Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich, Richard Wilbur, William Stafford, and Elizabeth Bishop. And I'm thinking now what sublime irony it is that this book we studied together, one of the few titles I remember from the scores I read in graduate school, is indicative of perhaps the single most important mission I see myself having as a teacher, that is, helping my students discover and articulate the voice that is great within each of them.

While I recall you sharing ideas and stories about these writers and their work, I also remember that we students got to talk in class, too. A lot. We didn't just speak in response to a question you posed for which you already had the answer. That game was played elsewhere, but not in your class. You invited real thought and real response to questions that you, too, were exploring in your own thinking. In addition to ideas, you invited us to share our feelings about the poems we were reading and discussing. Sometimes we read the poems aloud and they were so beautiful I would feel the hairs on my arms standing to attention. I learned some years later while reading a biography of Emily Dickinson that she, too, would experience a physical sensation when she read a

good poem. In fact, recognizing her body's response to the words was her signal that what she had just encountered was indeed a poem and not some lesser form of writing. The hairs on my arms standing to attention were my signal that a poet's words, as I sat in our circle, had brushed against my life. It's a feeling I've sought again and again these past 28 years.

It was later in my career as a student, in fact two graduate programs down the road from my degree in theology that I learned about democracy in education. Exploring the works of John Dewey, Eduard Lindeman, and Paulo Freire, I began to appreciate the enormity of the stakes at hand when a teacher empowers learners to think for themselves, to bring their personal experiences into the classroom as "a living textbook," and to have a voice. I would work hard in my own career as a teacher trying to develop skills to follow these great educational leaders' vision for good teaching. But it was in your poetry class that I experienced them first and first-hand. T.S. Eliot once wrote that as we become older, the past takes on a different pattern and ceases to be mere sequence. We had the experience but missed the meaning. The meaning of your approach to teaching only came clearer to me a decade or so later when I struggled to formulate my own educational philosophy.

I spoke of the hairs on my arms standing to attention. But you always seemed to be at attention, that is, attending to the small details in a poem and the little things in life that, when examined closely and for what they are, can reveal so much meaning and beauty. The former Library of Congress Poetry Consultant, Josephine Jacobsen, wrote a review of one of your collections of poems in which she noted your extraordinary powers of perception. And, I would add, compassion. Not only do you see things that most people miss, but you seem to care about them as well. I love, for example, your poem about the old broom you once saw at work in the hands of a custodian:

Like a tattered regiment,

loyal to the last,

the straws of this old broom

strive to serve, and strain.

Left and right

shot straws fall.

Right and left

the failing remnant

sweep their fallen comrades

dead away.

And the magic of the detail you were able to perceive in old brooms, or a wayside mailbox, or balloons at a circus was magnified when it came to your students. You saw each of us bringing a gift to our poetry class, something in our personality or intelligence or abilities to see and talk about the world. For some of my classmates this special gift was their ability to link ideas together into a chain of logic; for others it was a quirky sense of humor; still others were seen as bringing the gift of passion. You graciously accepted these offerings that some of us didn't even know we had until you pointed out our own gifts to us. By perceiving our individual strengths and paying attention to them - to us - you provided your students with a safe place to learn. Your class became a garden in

which I felt I could set roots and grow. Perhaps you had known about but had not told us of that beautiful and haunting line from the Talmud that many years later the African-American writer, Sapphire, chose as the epigram to introduce her novel, *Push*: "Every blade of grass has an angel standing over it whispering 'Grow, Grow . . . " You whispered, and we grew.

Yes - we grew from your whispering, but perhaps even more from your listening. As one who himself has been teaching now for some 20 years, I have come to know how powerful, important, and potentially transformative listening is. And also how rare and difficult. In an essay I wrote some years ago on the subject of education and mysticism, I commented how we educators celebrate too much the importance of speech - whether expressed in lectures, discussions, symposia, workshops, dialogues, or seminars - and celebrate too little the art of listening and the spirit of quietude and silence that listening requires. Sam Keen once suggested that every university should offer a course entitled "Silence, Wonder and the Art of Surrender." The course's aim? "It will aid students to develop an inner silence, to cultivate the ability to let things happen, to welcome, to listen, to allow, to be at ease in situations in which surrender rather than striving for control is appropriate."

By way of a novel I've recently read which was introduced to me by two former Russell Chair Holders - Will Callender and Jerry Conway - I have come to a new awareness about the power of listening. The novel is *Momo* written by the German author, Michael Ende. It's about a little girl who, among other estimable talents, offers to her friends and acquaintances the gift of being an extraordinary listener. Here is one of my favorite passages:

She listened in a way that made slow-witted people have

flashes of inspiration. It wasn't that she actually said anything or asked questions that put such ideas into their heads. She simply sat there and listened with the utmost attention and sympathy, fixing them with her big dark eyes, and they suddenly became aware of ideas whose existence they had never suspected.

Momo could listen in such a way that . . . shy people felt suddenly confident and at ease, or downhearted people felt happy and hopeful. And if someone felt that his life had been a failure, and that he himself was only one among millions of wholly unimportant people who could be replaced as easily as broken windowpanes, he would go and pour out his heart to Momo, and, even as he spoke, he would come to realize by some mysterious means that he was absolutely wrong; that there was only one person like himself in the whole world, and that, consequently, he mattered to the world in his own particular way. Such was Momo's talent for listening.

Listening is a way of attending. It is also a way of accepting. According to M. Scott Peck, listening is something we must do actively and requires hard work. Many people do not realize this or are not willing to do the work (and often I'm afraid I must place myself in this group). "When we extend ourselves by attempting to listen well," Peck writes, "we take an extra step and walk an extra mile. We do so in opposition to the inertia of laziness or the resistance of fear."

Because it both attends and accepts listening is one of the most important ways in which we may care for and love one another. We listen with our ears, of course. But there are other ways. I recall reading about Johan Sebastian Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, commenting on her husband's eyes. "They were listening eyes," she said.

And deep listening, as you know Joe, and have practiced with me and countless others, also happens with the heart. Not long ago I saw the metaphor, "a listening heart," in an essay by one of my favorite contemporary authors, Kathleen Norris. During our senior adult education seminar last semester, I asked my graduate students to think about this metaphor with me by way of a concept map. Words that branched across the white board as descriptors of a listening heart included compassionate, humane, nurturing, kind, tender, collaborative, authentic, respectful, empathic, loving. I have to think that these traits would greatly enhance any job description for a profession which depends upon the art of listening - musician, counselor, minister, social worker . . . and yes, teacher.

One outcome of your listening heart as a teacher was to encourage me to write. As a member of your poetry class I wrote brief papers intended to be personal reflections and interpretations. Because you were more concerned with creativity than criticism, my papers didn't come back marked all over in red ink like they did from other teachers over the years. You went out of your way to

remind me of my successes, as small as they may have been at times. Your encouragement nurtured courage on my part to take risks - a bolder statement here, a transgression of grammatical norms there, even a venture into the creation of my own verse.

I would later learn that many people, even those deep into their adult years, are afraid to write because somebody - in many cases a teacher - had once told them that they did not write well. So this important part of their human voice went silent. It makes me so angry to hear this story of strangled writing repeated student after student, semester after semester. I say to myself, and to them: "Who gave your teachers this right to say these deadly things to you? To lance your spirit with the point of a pen?" I remember what you told me once about making such judgments: "There are two kinds of people in the world – the righteous and the unrighteous. And the righteous make the categories!"

What most of us need along the way as learners of writing (or of anything else that is great and difficult) is a teacher whose faith in our capabilities exceeds our own. Somebody to be our cheerleader. Somebody who places himself beside us rather than above us - a "guide on the side rather than a sage on stage," as the aphorism goes. Somebody who is also continuing to learn and struggling to open new horizons of thought and expression in his own work. Teachers are first and foremost learners. If we ever forget that we can quickly slide the slippery slope toward becoming fixed, certain, and eventually arrogant. The world needs little more of that kind of spirit of smugness, especially among its teachers.

One of the ways you and I have stayed in touch over the years is through sharing each others' writing. I love the way, for example, you mail to me an occasional newspaper op-ed piece you had written for *The Baltimore Sun* and perhaps toss into the envelope several new poems. And in a note penned into

the corner you'll ask about my work and family and invite me to send you some of the writing I've been doing.

I want you to know how impressed I am about the learning project you engaged in celebration of your 70th year. To read every play and every poem written by William Shakespeare! And then, not being content to merely read the great bard, you wrote an interpretation of his sonnets - all 154 of them. And several years before that project you undertook the study of another immortal writer and his work. If I remember correctly, you even took classes in Italian so you could read Dante's *The Divine Comedy* not only in its various English translations, but also in the author's vernacular.

With such an impressive learning agenda which has continued well into your retirement years, I've long felt you have managed to keep your priorities straight. And I can still hear you quoting Franz Rosenzweig's pithy statement about priorities: "It's better to write than to read; it's better to write poetry than to write; it's better to live than to write poetry."

It is your actions as a priest, writer, and human being of deep conviction that speak to me most about the spirit of teaching. For one is less the authentic teacher if he says one thing and does another, if he avows beliefs yet fails to act upon them, if his talk goes one way and his walk another.

I remember situations earlier in your career when you ended up paying a heavy price for acting upon your deepest conviction. As a young priest you were on a fast-track to power. You were assigned to work in the central office, "the chancery," in the oldest and one of the most influential Archdioceses in the United States. Promoted to the rank of monsignor just several years after ordination. Given the responsibility by the American bishops to translate the Second Vatican Council's documents from Latin to English. Appointed editor of an important

Catholic newspaper. You were in the middle of the Roman Catholic circles of power. You were barely 35 years of age.

Then came 1966 and you were increasingly troubled by America's role in Southeast Asia. You were one of the first voices to speak out against the Vietnam War and organized religion's complicity in it. You criticized the bishops for their lack of antiwar leadership. You received angry letters, some even suggesting that our country would be better off if you were exported to Mexico.

And then, around this same period, you took a strong editorial stance against a Gubernatorial candidate in Maryland who had expressed racist tendencies. Many of your colleagues in the church supported this politician because he was Roman Catholic. You looked for and saw the higher principle. And then, not long after, you took perhaps your greatest risk in the challenge of authority. You happened to be on assignment in Rome on the very day Pope Paul VI published his encyclical, "Humanae Vitae," his famously divisive statement against birth control. You were so pained by this encyclical that you resigned your Monsignorship at the Vatican which only got you into more trouble with your bishop back home.

From this time on, no longer working for the Catholic paper and other ecclesiastical bridges burned, you made your living as a kind of teaching and writing vagabond. Courses here and there at St. Mary's Seminary and Loyola College; writing projects which yielded modest royalties. No church appointments. No tenure track faculty positions. No financial security. Only a magnificent mind, splendid soul, and a once-every-so-often invitation to young seminary students to join your poetry circle and talk about writing and life.

In recent weeks and months, while planning this conference and writing this "talking letter keynote," I've been reading quite a bit of the contemporary

educational guru, Parker J. Palmer. He has published two books within the past 18 months, both about teaching. In one Palmer ruminates on what I think is a beautifully crafted definition of the concept of

vocation: "The place where your deep gladness and the world's great hunger meet." Some 30 years ago Joe, the gladness of your teaching spirit met the hunger of a young man searching for his own voice and place in the world.

In his other book, Parker Palmer suggests that teaching, at its core, is like nature's profligate seedings: "If we want to save our lives, we cannot cling to them but must spend them with abandon." When I read this I recalled a line from the poet William Stafford, to whom you introduced me in 1972. "Our life," he wrote, "We should give it away, this breath, and another, as easy as it came to us."

This grateful student thanks you for all that you have given away - to me, to the world, to the spirit of teaching itself.

For Further Reading

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