

Seeking Wisdom and Cultivating Delight

Teaching Literature for Life

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This was the most disappointing class of my college career. Those were the words I wrote in big letters on the evaluation for an ancient philosophy course I took during my final college semester. To this day, I remember writing those words because I did so with such fear and trembling. Throughout college, I almost *never* criticized my chosen courses, for I was regularly enchanted by my various professors and happy to learn what they had to teach. But that philosophy course disappointed me. Not because of the subject matter, which included the pre-Socratics, Plato, and a smattering of Aristotle. Not because it was poorly taught; in fact, my professor was smart, articulate, and deft at answering difficult questions. Rather, it was disappointing because it wasn't what I thought a philosophy class *should* be. As I went on to say, "I thought this class would teach me about truth, goodness, and beauty, but instead it was nothing more than a language and logic exercise."

That old feeling resurfaced in a different way this past spring when I observed three of our best English and education majors student teach at local high schools. All three students were bright, hardworking, and even keen, insightful readers of literature. They were also assiduous in their preparation of lesson plans, with every classroom move painstakingly charted, down to how many minutes would be devoted to each classroom task and how every activity could be correlated to precise learning objectives and assessment outcomes. And yet, as I observed the classes unfold in practice, something crucial seemed to be missing, as one teacher methodically defined key types

of comedy in *Catcher in the Rye* and another teacher dutifully helped students identify forms of logos, pathos, and ethos in Brutus's and Mark Antony's famous funeral speeches. None of the young teachers' exercises was intrinsically bad. But what was missing, what got left behind in these assiduous efforts to meet skills goals and predetermined content criteria, was a sense that human experiences and great ideas were at stake in the literature being discussed, and that the teacher's attitude toward those essentials—awe, wonder, delight, joy, or passion—matters in drawing them out.

This attitude toward literature cannot be scripted in the complex grids, flowcharts, and outlines that today's teachers are trained to use in planning their classes. But a disposition of delight is no less important for teaching literature well. The effect of a teacher's attitude toward his or her subject was powerfully impressed upon me during my own college days by one of my classics professors, a spry, wiry man with bushy gray hair and beard and mischievous blue eyes easily lit by a laugh. Daily without fail, he would zip into class with an irrepressible zest for the day's work, before greeting us with a cheerful "Chairete, pantes!" and gleefully announcing the grammar topic du jour—the aorist aspect, say, or some other obscure grammarian's delight. At first, we students were as mystified as we were delighted by the pleasure he found in such prosaic topics, but his pleasure soon became wholly our own. And I have always remembered that if he could conjure so much joy in teaching the subjunctive or translating ten lines of Koine, all the more should I be able to do so for Chaucer or Austen or, even, the innumerable tiny tasks I teach my own children. Now, many years later, though I make little use of the nuances and niceties of ancient Greek in my daily work, I still remember the *felt experience* of his disposition toward classical grammar and literature. And that felt experience was a lesson for life.

Though the importance of such an attitude toward the literary texts we teach may seem obvious, it deserves renewed attention. As education professor Shelley C. Sherman (2015) has argued, cultivating a "joyful attitude" toward one's subject needs to be deliberately nurtured among today's teachers, given the educational establishment's growing focus on "technical competencies." Sherman notes, "There is an urgent need to investigate ways in which teacher educators can revitalize the notion that teaching and learning are, or surely can be, joyful endeavors," and she sees that urgency as all the more pressing at a time of low teacher morale. To put that urgency into context, she points to Nel Noddings's 2014 assessment that today's educational preoccupations, such as intense focus on standardized testing, have negatively affected teacher morale. And Noddings's view echoes Sonia Nieto's (2013: 3) similar observations:

“Novice teachers who join the profession with enthusiasm and high hopes may not be prepared for what they find when they first enter a classroom: rigid and unquestioned insistence on standardized tests as arbiters of excellence, unparalleled surveillance of teachers’ work, a dizzying array of mandates to reach . . . and as a result an oftentimes joyless environment.” Sherman, quoting J. Manuel and J. Hughes (2006), concludes from such assessments that “the dominant emphasis in teacher preparation remains on methodology, with little attention ‘to the moral, spiritual, emotional, empathic and subjective dimensions of the teacher’s life and work.’” Given this contemporary educational predicament, Sherman believes it is a “moral imperative” to train teachers not only in “technical competencies” but also in the more elusive realm of the teacher’s emotional and spiritual disposition—the teacher’s ability to experience and convey joy in the classroom.

And yet, it is not just the teacher’s attitude of enjoyment—a spirit of playfulness and pleasure—that matters. Equally important to teaching literature for life is a profound *seriousness*—a conviction that the literary texts we teach matter and not merely because they teach us to analyze well, hone critical-thinking skills, develop rich vocabularies, and master content. That they do. But they matter most profoundly because they offer experiences of the world that deepen and enrich our own experience. For instance, when I teach Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, I ask students to trace the subtle movements of Joe Gargery’s mental reflections as he relates how the “drudging and slaving” of his own mother has made him permanently sympathetic to women and disinclined to rebel against Mrs. Joe and make her life any more difficult. This moment in the novel is a minor one that students often miss when reading the novel on their own, and yet that moment changes Pip’s view (he realizes then that he has begun to “look up to Joe in his heart”), and it challenges our own facile assumptions about Joe’s intelligence and Mrs. Joe’s worthiness of compassion. As Gary Saul Morson (2015) has observed, “Many disciplines teach that we ought to empathize with others. But these disciplines do not involve actual practice in empathy. Great literature does that, and in that respect its study remains unique among university-taught subjects.” Beyond providing such experiences of empathy, Dickens’s novel also challenges us to consider a host of profound human questions: whence identity arises, whether guilt is collectively shared, how one comes to be educated, and what moral consequences might arise from being frozen by anger or grief. And those narrative questions—just a few of many—illuminate questions of meaning and value that students may well confront in their own lives as they consider how to respond to a hard and difficult family member or the

challenge of caring for their own “Aged P,” or as they debate whether to retain or release a deep grievance. Thus, teaching literature for life is premised on the conviction that literature matters because it shapes our response to life. It may even, as Mark Edmundson (2013: 205) has avowed, “transform a life.”

That the ideas and experiences of a fictional text can shape a person’s life surfaced recently in a conversation I had with a thirty-eight-year-old man who participated in Luther College’s distinctive Paideia program two decades ago.¹ During our conversation, he confessed, with some excitement, that he *finally* understands, twenty years later, why his professors assigned *The Odyssey*; that his professors’ efforts to teach him about Odysseus’s wanderings and homecoming quest have suddenly illuminated his own midlife wanderings; and that, moreover, he has a deeper understanding of his life today as a consequence. This educational outcome of his professors’ literature instruction would never have been reflected by the job he landed upon graduation. Nor would it have been demonstrated in an exam or writing portfolio assessed as he was exiting college. Nor even would he have been prescient enough at twenty-two to record in his course evaluation the impact of Homer’s story and his professors’ attention to the “enduring questions” it raises. Neither the story nor the teaching had yet borne fruit.

But wisdom grows like that, silently, slowly, and often unseen, as Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov* so powerfully illustrates. Echoing its biblical epigraph about “the corn of wheat that falls to the ground,” the novel repeatedly illustrates how stories sow seeds of wisdom that fall to the ground, lie fallow for a time, and then bear life. So Father Zosima remembers his brother Markeł’s stories years later and, at a pivotal moment in his life, is suddenly transformed by them. Zosima’s own life story and teachings take root in the mysterious stranger’s life over time and bear fruit. And Alyosha, who temporarily abandons Zosima’s teaching, depressed as he becomes by the elder’s death and shamefully decaying body, eventually harvests the wisdom he has gleaned from Zosima, sharing that bread of life with a new generation during the novel’s quietly climactic ending. Although Dostoevsky’s novel is not typically interpreted as a novel of education, it is very much a novel about the process of education and how absorbing other people’s stories affects human growth in wisdom.

In the literature classroom, therefore, it is paramount to remember the powerful potential for stories to sow seeds of wisdom. While there will always be literary terms to be defined, concepts to be mastered, and technical territory to be covered, the teachers who most profoundly teach literature guide their students to find meaning, value, and beauty in the texts being

taught. And those same teachers see the act of reading literature as an opportunity to pursue a life of wisdom seeking, or *philosophia*. According to Mark Bauerlein's (2015) assessment, however, the teacher's primary role as sage or professional wisdom seeker has too often been overshadowed on college campuses by roles of alternative importance (career counselor, for instance). Nonetheless, it was just such a search for wisdom that I hoped my philosophy teacher long ago would foster through the study of Plato and Aristotle, and it is that search I now invite my literature students to embark upon, insofar as literature is in part contextualized philosophy—philosophy situated within particular lives and narratives. Against the trend toward reducing literature to skills that can be taught or content that can be mastered, my own hope has been to encourage students to ponder the big, unmasterable ideas literature raises—the perennial questions that confront all human beings, no matter their time and place. What does it mean to serve justice? What does it mean to love? Why do human beings suffer? Are there any gods, and if so, what sorts of beings are they? And, above all, what does it mean to live deeply, meaningfully, and well? By raising such questions as we read Aeschylus or Marie de France or Toni Morrison, students can put the study of literature to the service of their own quests for greater wisdom or, as Edmundson (2013: 118) has simply but profoundly put it, for “becoming a person.”

To recognize that dimension of wisdom instruction within education, whether literary or otherwise, is not to shortchange a commitment to teaching skills such as critical thinking and writing. There are compelling reasons for the educational establishment's growing emphasis on teaching skills and content mastery, some of which come from the constituencies educational institutions serve. Studies have shown a growing disconnect between the desire of students, parents, teachers, and even politicians for an educational focus on skills building, on the one hand, and the seemingly idealistic aspirations of educational institutions, on the other (Chan et al. 2015: 28). It is in part to redress such a disconnect that both secondary and higher education institutions have moved toward more intensive assessment of identifiable skills and content mastery, a trend that some see as a salutary shift.² Unfortunately, this shift has occasioned a naive division between so-called realistic parents, politicians, and students and unrealistic, romantic, or quixotic educational professionals.³ In fact, there is no need for such an either-or opposition. It goes without saying that teaching skills in writing, rhetoric, and analysis (among others) is important to any education and, indeed, to the quest for wisdom itself.

And, of course, those skills can and do get students jobs, as I was

reminded recently by a former English major, whose communication skills helped her land a position as a senior marketing specialist at a major corporation. Helping students prepare for jobs matters; in fact, the president of the liberal arts college where I teach has even gone so far as to assert that we educators have a moral obligation to prepare students for jobs. No doubt he is right. But as teachers of literature, we sell ourselves short when we see the study of literature strictly as skills preparation for testing success or job placement or when we let those goals fully supplant the ideals that once motivated the teaching of literature. Studying literature enables students to accomplish those academic and career ends, but it does much more. To that point, the cultural historian Ian Beacock (2015) encourages humanists to be bolder in their claims about the nature and purpose of the humanities: “This is what the humanities are for—not writing better quarterly reports or grabbing a gig in corporate communications—but for posing fundamental questions of value and helping us imagine alternatives to the way we live.”

Although Beacock’s comment is belied by my student’s job success and that of other humanities students like her, his assertion is nonetheless important because it suggests that the study of literature and other humanistic disciplines fosters a kind of education that goes beyond training in isolatable analytical or rhetorical skills. As Robert J. Sternberg argues in his study *Wisdom, Intelligence, and Creativity Synthesized* (2003), there are dimensions of intelligence and education beyond the critical and analytical skills we so often emphasize that demand our attention as educators. Indeed, a real education must speak to the whole person, not just the rational intellect narrowly construed. As Sternberg (2007: B12) explains, “Our society does not only need people who can analyze and memorize well; even more important are citizens and leaders who are also creative, practical, and wise.” The study of literature centrally contributes to that end, for it enlivens student imaginations, expands students’ capacity for empathy, and encourages them to examine deep questions of meaning and value. In other words, studying literature is a crucial way for students to become not just more knowledgeable human beings but wiser ones as well. And that goal—the goal of a whole life wisely led—is neither romantic nor quixotic; it is the most realistic goal of all.

Today, though, that educational telos is in danger of being overshadowed. In the wake of decades of educational legislation relentlessly focused on skills development, content mastery, and standardized testing, and in a college milieu increasingly defined by pressure to prove tangible returns on student investment, two pedagogical essentials at risk of being left behind in

the teaching of literature are the spirit of play that animates literary study and the search for wisdom that motivates it. Both habits are crucial to cultivate but difficult to assess in the short space of a high school semester or even a college career. But ultimately, ten or twenty years hence, when students become parents or teachers, social workers or therapists, insurance agents or information technology analysts, it will not be the ability to distinguish between *travesty* and *burlesque* that they remember. It will be the felt experience they have inherited from their teacher's disposition toward literature and the wisdom they have gleaned from encountering literary worlds rich in great ideas and shareable human experiences.

To cultivate in students a disposition of delight and a passion for seeking wisdom through the study of literature is an act of faith. There is no way to prove by survey or standardized test that these habits have borne fruit. But I trust that if we plant these seeds in the modest gardens that are our classrooms, then long after students have left the classroom they will find further ways, as good gardeners of their own lives, to harvest the fruits of wisdom and delight. And that's why it matters to teach literature for life.

Notes

1. Developed in 1977, Luther College's Paideia is an interdisciplinary program focusing on "enduring questions" and ethical values, with a sequence of courses aimed at providing students with a foundation for success in education and in life.
2. Joan Hawthorne (2015), for instance, has praised the many positive changes occasioned by assessment of key skills and targeted content mastery, including a shift of emphasis from what students *know* to what they can *do*, a more vigorous faculty dialogue about the ends and goals of our instruction, and, consequently, a "more purposeful [attitude] about what happens in our programs and classes."
3. Apropos this terminology, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks (2015) has dubbed Mark Edmundson one of the "new Romantics" for reasons evident in Edmundson's *Self and Soul* (2015), as well as *Why Teach?* (2013). In the latter, Edmundson writes about teaching as a Keatsian "soul-making" process and, in an update of Northrop Frye, about literature as nearly a kind of secular scripture (168–72). But in applying the epithet "new Romantic," Brooks counterculturally uses the term for praise rather than derision, going against the grain of what Edmundson has called our "progressively more practical, materially oriented, and skeptical" culture.

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