

# It All Happened in the Fifth Grade

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My assumption is that those of us who teach do as we were taught, by marvelous teachers who opened up new horizons for us, coached us along by listening and encouraging us to do the best we possibly could. I think back almost 50 years ago to a four-room grammar school and a marvelous nun. In those benighted days, classes were doubled-up, two grades to a room. The pastor, a curmudgeon of extraordinary proportions, insisted that students use straight pens and each desk came equipped with an inkwell. Fountain pens were diabolical devices fit only for hell-bent, English-speaking Protestants. Well, Sister Catherine Jeanne somehow managed to sneak some of these heretical devices into our hands so we could write like the best of our mid-20th century peers. She taught me in the fifth and sixth grades, and, because of some miraculous intervention, in the seventh and eighth as well. And who would teach me biology and be my homeroom teacher in my sophomore year of high school? Well, none other. Ours was a small world. For five years this dedicated woman taught with enormous passion. She cared for her students in immeasurable ways. She could be empathetic and demanding and would rejoice when I, or anyone else, finally figured out the geometry problem. She also knew how to handle slightly obnoxious adolescents, calling them to task in the best of ways. She did more than teach. She shaped minds and young people's personalities in ways that made them relish learning.

Teaching is about empathy and passion. If you don't have a sense of your students, what makes them tick, why they want to learn, where they're coming from, perhaps the best thing is to consider another career. Of course, this requires a lot of work. Mine is another generation. I speak a different language and grew

up with different assumptions about how things work. So, to teach effectively I have to learn a few lessons. I have to let go of my presuppositions and listen to another version of reality, one that is often more cogent than the one I thought to be self-evidently true. Teaching and learning are simultaneous processes, and being behind the desk means sitting behind it in equal measure. Otherwise, there is no learning. There is only an imperious and ineffective imposition of facts and figures that *should* put students to sleep and call into question what real education is actually about. And then there is passion. Teachers who don't love what they teach are criminal bores. Of course, when I have to teach about fourth century Greek metaphysics and their role in the Council of Nicea, I'm a bit intimidated. But, despite my own intellectual limitations, I find the topic fascinating and want my students to share the same humility and enthusiasm for understanding what was, in fact, a crucial intellectual moment in western history. Getting into the minds and times of our ancestors is a wonderful challenge and privilege. And since we never get it entirely right, we can try and try again.

Years later, in graduate school, I had another marvelous teacher. A Jesuit with a stunning intellect (no, that does not always follow), he made me and his other students read 100 pages of Karl Rahner and condense it all into a single-page précis, double spaced to boot. He simply refused to read the second page because he insisted on an economy of thought and writing that bordered on the impossible. But it could be done, and Roger Haight was as patient as much as he was gifted as a scholar and teacher. He was also an avid ale connoisseur and had no compunction about inviting his students and fellow learners to the nearby pubs of Toronto. Roger was my second reader, and in the dark night of the third chapter of my dissertation, he invited me out for a beer, told me where I was going wrong, and made me laugh at my only convoluted intensity. I finished off chapter three in less than a week. Roger was and is such a fantastic scholar that he has had himself investigated, silenced, and reinstated by the Vatican. He taught me that true scholarship can carry a price, but intellectual integrity is priceless. To teach is to be simultaneously humble and honest, speaking the truth as best as we can ascertain it.

Like most people, I live in a prosaic, functional world. I teach my classes, write what seems to be 2,000 letters of recommenda-

tion a year, meet with students, and do whatever committee work that comes my way. But then there are those unsolicited moments when I look down the expanse of the Eastman Quad and feel enormously privileged to be a teacher. I think of the many, many wonderful students I have come to know over the years. I think of those who these past 10 years accompanied me to Peru, my second country, learning about poverty and courage, and the struggle for justice in an unjust world. I can't remember all their names, but I can vividly see their faces, in classrooms, in the slums of Lima where they came face to face with suffering, and in the splendor of the Peruvian Andes, where the sky is bluer than blue and the stars are frankly outrageous. Teaching is about conversing; it is listening and speaking about what it means to be an educated person. It is more about questions than answers. And, it is an incredible honor. Every semester I encounter vibrant, inquisitive young women and men and know that the future is in good hands. Being able to teach and learn with them is a real gift and holding a piece of chalk in my hand makes my world go round.