

“Better Than We Were”

**By
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**Presented to the Unitarian Society of Amherst
February 13, 2000**

Freud and Solomon. Einstein and Superman. Mother Teresa. Patience, stamina, creativity and commitment. But above all – courage and faith. That’s what it takes to be a good teacher. Nothing more. Nothing less.

I heard a story recently that seems to illustrate many of these qualities.

There was this high school senior, who was the star football player, and a pretty good student, except in geometry. The team is headed to the championship game, but this student will have to sit it out if he fails his mid-term math exam. Desperate to play in the big game, the student goes to the math teacher and asks for help. “Teach me,” the student pleads. “You’re a teacher. Teach me! Help me do better.”

The math teacher agrees, believing, as I suspect most teachers would, that he can indeed help this student do better. So he starts tutoring the player every morning before regular classes, spending his own time to give this student extra help. A few days pass and the teacher learns that all the student really needed was a little positive reinforcement, something to make him feel as confident in the classroom as he does on the playing field. Finally, after a couple weeks of these special sessions, he decides to give the student a test, not a test of his math skills – he has long since realized that the student is capable of passing the course – but a test of his confidence. So he calls the student into the classroom and says: “You’ve made great progress. But before you can play in the game you have to answer this question: What is the name of a triangle with two equal sides?”

The student is puzzled. He expected a much tougher exam. Unsure if there is a trick in the question, he stares at his teacher, who is sitting calmly and confidently at his desk.

Finally, after a lot of fidgeting, the student tentatively, in a meek voice, mutters: "Isosceles."

"Final answer?" says the teacher.

A bit more fidgeting and the student straightens his shoulders and in a stronger voice says, "Yes, that's my final answer."

At this point the teacher showers the student with confetti and sends him off, feeling like a million dollars, to play, and win, the championship game.

Maybe it doesn't hurt for a teacher to have a touch of Regis Philbin, too.

Teach me.

I wonder how often we really consider the magnitude of those words?

The first people to teach us are, of course, our parents. I have spoken to many parents who tell me that the full weight of their responsibility doesn't become clear until they have the stunning realization that they are their child's first teacher, that they, in addition to fulfilling the responsibilities of providing, protecting and nurturing, must overcome their own doubts and frustrations and start their children on a lifetime of learning.

How many of you have seen the movie *Mr. Holland's Opus*? Briefly, it's the story of a high school music teacher and how his students become the notes in the great symphony he dreams of composing. But it's also the story of how this teacher, a lover of music, relates to his son, who loses his hearing as a toddler.

In what I consider the most important scene of the movie, Mr. Holland is returning home from school on December 8th, 1980. John Lennon has just been murdered. Mr. Holland is devastated by this. I'm sure many of us here remember how we felt that day. As Mr. Holland tries to tell his son, now a teenager, what has happened, and what John Lennon

and the Beatles mean to him, his deaf son, who has never heard the music, makes a comic gesture signifying death. Angered, Mr. Holland dismisses his son by signing, “You wouldn’t understand,” and stomps away. The son then follows Mr. Holland into the house, grabs some old Beatles albums from the shelf and says: “Teach me.”

At that moment their relationship changes. Mr. Holland realizes that for too many years he has neglected one of the most important responsibilities of parenthood – being his child’s first teacher. He has been so focused on teaching his students, on earning a living to provide food and shelter for his family, and he has been so frustrated by his son’s impairment, that he never realizes, until that moment, that his son, his first student, needs his teaching gift as much, if not more, than his classroom students. The realization comes suddenly, leaping from the dark places in his own heart, to make him a better parent, a better teacher, and ultimately a better person.

Teach me.

Parents, guardians, anyone entrusted with the care of children need to be aware of the demands of this request. Like Mr. Holland, parents have jobs, they have bills to pay and dreams to pursue. They have a thousand different demands on their time and their talents and nothing will matter to them more, or cause them more self-doubt, than the realization that they are a child’s first, and most important, teacher. Whether it’s something as simple as teaching their children to tie their shoes or teaching them a rhyme they will remember the rest of their lives, or something as profound as teaching them to read the rhyme themselves, opening for them the door to art and literature, history and science, they will be nagged by self-doubt, by the dark places in their own hearts. They will ask themselves: Do I know enough? Am I smart enough? Am I really good enough to be a teacher?

As the people children look up to first, and most often, parents bear the brunt of this responsibility, and the disproportionate share of the self-doubt that goes along with it. But parents should not feel alone guiding their children on this lifetime of learning. They will have, or at least they ought to have, many partners along the way, partners that may not seem obvious at first, but become more apparent as their children grow. Artists, members of the clergy, and, dare I say it, even politicians, play a supporting role in the education process. People who work in these fields are constantly, of necessity, studying, observing and thinking. And although they use different methods to convey what they've learned from their observations and interactions, each is striving for the same goal: Learning and understanding and sharing what they learn.

But learning and understanding can't be achieved in isolation. In order to learn we must first understand and to reach understanding there must be a partnership. The artist and audience, the clergy and congregation, the politician and constituents – each functions best when there is a spirit of partnership.

But I fear the partnership is suffering in at least one important area in our communities. I fear that the demands and circumstances of modern life have strained, almost to the breaking point, the partnership between the community and teachers, the professionals, the ones in our schools, the ones who heard the call and now devote their lives to education.

Not so very long ago, parents and teachers enjoyed a stronger partnership, I think, than they do today. Not so very long ago, our families had two parents, one paycheck and more time to spend in school helping teachers do the best job they could possibly do. Not so very long ago, teachers were respected. And, not so very long ago, teachers were expected to do nothing more than educate our children.

But today, more and more families have one live-in parent and two paychecks and the demands of simply getting by have left little time for anything else. Today, wherever there is an unraveling of the fabric of our society, teachers are being asked to gather up the strands and make us whole again. Reading, writing, arithmetic, character lessons, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, broken families, poverty, hunger – today all this falls within the purview of the average teacher. And today, in what is the saddest testimony of all to our societal failings, teachers like Dave Sanders at Columbine High School in Colorado and Shannon Wright in Jonesboro, Arkansas, are giving their lives to protect their students from unspeakable violence.

And what do we do? We find someone to blame. We blame the media, in all its variety, for bombarding our children with violent images and distracting them from their studies. We blame the teachers and school administrators, and the schools they attended, for being inept and incompetent. We tell the media to stop poisoning our homes and theaters with gratuitous images of violence and degradation. We tell the teachers that they must pass this test, meet that requirement, do more and more and more, so that they can prove to us that they are smart enough, good enough, worthy enough to hold one of the lowest paying professional jobs our society has to offer.

Freud and Solomon. Einstein and Superman. Mother Teresa. Counselor, social worker, surrogate parent, benevolent big brother, loyal big sister. This is what we expect of teachers. Nothing more. Nothing less. For at least eight hours a day we expect teachers to meet these unreasonable expectations. For at least eight hours a day we expect teachers to be all things to all people. And on the occasions when they aren't, on the infrequent days when their wisdom and strength, intelligence and compassion fall short, do we lend a shoulder to

their staggering burden. No, instead we hang around their necks the millstone of public ridicule.

Instead of casting blame, instead of heaping scorn upon those who make the effort to teach our children and advance the human family, I suggest that we make the effort to reconnect with the classroom and the teacher. I suggest that we change our minds and start viewing the classroom, not as a room, in some building, over there, somewhere, but as the center of the community, the heart and soul of the community, the place where we make our stand and declare that the education of our children is our most important community endeavor. I suggest that we esteem teachers as our leaders, our guides, our friends who will welcome us back into the classroom with warm smiles that seem to say “Why did you stay away so long?” I suggest that we turn our backs on blame and collectively accept responsibility for what is wrong in our communities and commit our time and our talents to doing all we can to make things better.

A friend of mine told me about a history teacher he had in high school. Students loved and feared this teacher in equal measure because of the way he conducted class – giving points and taking them away on the spot during classroom discussions. A correct or thoughtful answer merited five, sometimes even 10 points if it was really good, and nothing felt better to that particular student than getting that reward. But a poor answer solicited the dreaded “Five Off!” And, although only one student at a time suffered this rebuke, the whole class shuddered when it happened and silently vowed to be better prepared tomorrow. Besides that, this teacher was also controversial because he taught what could rightly be called character lessons. There were days when this teacher would put away the textbook and give lectures on basic life issues ranging from how to buy meat at the grocery store to how to be a decent human being. These lectures were always unannounced, but, of

course, first period students would spread the word that Mr. Van Devan (DEE vun) was giving his lecture on the nature of love, or how to behave on a date, for example, and the school would buzz the rest of the day. So, my friend tells me he still remembers, after all this time, this teacher saying that one way to be of good character is to conduct your life in such a way that you have a positive impact on the people you encounter, that you, by your words and deeds, give people the feeling that their lives have been improved for having known you. Or, to quote Mr. Van Devan directly, you should help people become “better than they were.”

Better than we were.

We all have had at least one teacher in our lives who, either by their daily example or by their extraordinary efforts, has made us better than we were, better than we might have been had we never known them.

For me, that person is Miss Wyman, one of my teachers at Revere High School.

I don't know where Miss Wyman was from, but it clearly wasn't Revere. She had a low voice and was accurate with her “Rs” – she actually pronounced them when they occurred, and didn't add them to the end of words. So, a native of “Reveah” she was not.

Miss Wyman taught German and geometry, and served as a study hall monitor. I had her for three years of German and I remember that because the class was always small, a study hall was scheduled at the same time in the back of the room. With one eye on the German class, and the other on the study hall students, Miss Wyman managed to help me become an excellent student of German. She even presented me with 50 dollars from her own pocket during the graduation ceremony, calling it the “Excellence in German Award.” She had created this award for her best student each year, she had said, although I found out

much later that I was the only one to have ever received this award. It was only 50 dollars, but it made me feel like a million

She was not so successful with me in geometry, however, and the frustration I felt over that subject came out once in an English assignment. The assignment was to rewrite the assassination scene of *Julius Caesar* to make it more contemporary. In my scene Brutus and his conspirators armed themselves with compasses and protractors, and, well you know the rest.

I got an “A” on that paper, and my English teacher, Miss Tye, asked me to read it to Miss Wyman. I was scared at first; I wasn’t sure how she would take it. But when I read it to the geometry class, she burst into the most energetic laughter I had ever heard. We became the best of friends that day and after that she intensified her valiant effort to make me better at geometry. But, alas, her effort produced only marginal success. I did pass geometry, but just barely, and only because Miss Wyman was my steadfast partner in that endeavor.

I should mention that tenacity is another quality of good teachers, a quality Miss Wyman had in abundance. Although she had every reason to, she never gave up on me. She showed me, by her ability to handle multiple tasks with an easy grace, the importance of keeping a sense of humor in stressful or frustrating situations. And she showed me, by her every-day example and her personal commitment to me, that there is nothing more powerful, more inspiring, more wonderful, than people who truly believe in what they do. She showed me that one single dedicated person, with a little faith and a lot of guts, can indeed move mountains, if only one stone at a time. And for that I will be forever grateful. If she were still alive I’d love to tell her what she has meant to me.

I recently came upon this book, “To Honor A Teacher.” It’s a book of poems and testimonials from a few famous people, but mostly ordinary people, about their most influential teacher. The book, published just last year, was compiled by Jeff Spoden, a social

studies teacher in California, and contains some very funny, moving and inspiring anecdotes about teachers and the profound ways they shape young lives.

It occurred to me that this would be a good thing to do, to pay tribute to the great teachers in our lives, the ones like Miss Wyman, the ones who changed us and made us better than we were.

Mr. Spoden is still working on this project and has plans to publish another volume soon. I invite you and your children to think about your own favorite teacher, and, if you want, write a tribute to that person in the next month. Send me a copy of it and I'll send all those I get off to Mr. Spoden. I have with me a copy of the project's guidelines, if you are interested.

As I prepared for today's remarks I did a little reading about Massachusetts' own Horace Mann, one of the most influential educators in our nation's history, and, I might add, a former state senator. One quote in particular struck me: "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." He said that to the graduating class of Antioch College in 1859. He died later that same year, having, during the course of his life, won perhaps one of the greatest of all human victories – firmly establishing the idea that education is essential to the advancement of humanity, that it is fundamental to democratic survival and that it must be available to everyone.

The things I've said today, and the suggestion that we join in Mr. Spoden's Teacher Appreciation Project, are, at best, modest gestures of support. I know that. I know that teachers will still face crowded classrooms and parents will still look down at crowded appointment books and wish there was more time to do all that needs to be done. I know the challenges we all face will still be there tomorrow. I know this won't be a great victory for humanity. But maybe it can be a small one, a small victory that can become great if we

treat it right. You know, a good garden is no accident. It takes work, lots of it. It takes patience, nurturing and careful tending to make it grow. It takes a partnership between the gardener and the elements, a partnership marked by an attitude of respect and appreciation. I think we can grow children and teachers in much the same way. If we treat children with love and respect, if we provide them a nurturing and supportive environment, then they have a better chance of growing into good, decent adults. If we treat teachers with respect, if we hold them to reasonable standards, if we appreciate their skills and commitment, if we adopt the attitude that we all are responsible for the education of our children, then we make the job of teaching better, we make our community better and we make our democracy better able to withstand whatever the future has in store. If we do these things, then we can realize our potential and grow ourselves into a community, a community of learners and a community of teachers.

But if we don't, if we fail to grasp the importance of re-establishing the spirit of partnership in our communities, especially when it comes to education, then we may find that we will stop learning. And if we, as individuals, stop learning, we will stop growing, and our communities will stop growing.

Every teacher is somebody's favorite teacher. Maybe, if we can devote a few hours to setting down on paper the impact a teacher has had on our lives, if we think about what that teacher has meant to us, how that teacher made us better than we were, then maybe some sunlight will brighten the dark places in our hearts and we will feel like returning that most uncommon favor. Maybe, with the help of that new light, we will see that some time has opened up in that schedule and we can go to school, go into a classroom, help first graders read better, help twelfth graders do better at geometry, help college students choose a career path. Maybe, if we can contribute some of our time and talents to the classroom, we can

help teachers by showing them that there are people in the community who care about our common future, that there are people like them, people of courage and faith, who are willing to help make things better than they were.