

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *The Teaching Profession*

## *What Are You Doing and Why Are You Doing It?*

**H**ere are three truths about teaching:

1. There exists in this country a resilient core of spectacular teachers who deserve the title “teacher.” Their very lives serve to instruct, energize, and inspire a generation of students.
2. There exists in this country another resilient core of teachers. This group does not inspire, does not teach well, and responds dismally to the challenge of educating children.
3. The educational community needs to find millions of new teachers who represent the first truth, and there is very little the educational community can do about those representing the second.

The United States faces a national challenge to improve our preparation of the next generation of teachers. We can hope to increase the likelihood that our children, especially children in urban, rural, and less advantaged school settings, can find themselves in the company of talented teachers. We know that consecutive experiences with teachers of quality can help children overcome the disadvantages of poverty. We also know the damaging effect a string of less than excellent teachers can have on the development of children.

We must acquire a new generation of quality teachers. We must do this in the face of a national perception of our profession as less desirable than other professions. We must do so in a nation that pays lip service to the importance of teaching but provides little in the way of incentives such as competitive salaries, professional working conditions, practitioner input on the development of curricula and school management, and clear professional advancement that does not take the quality teacher away from children. The irony of being a teacher is that we are often treated as children— forbidden to use a phone, required to ask permission to duplicate copies—teachers of twenty years' experience sadly realize they hold the identical responsibility as first-year teachers, and their expertise and experience generally are not sought to better their schools.

Despite these challenges, we must acquire this new generation of quality teachers. While legislators and pundits endlessly debate the many problems that we as teachers are not empowered to solve, we can still address one essential question central to quality teaching: How does one acquire the authority to stand in front of children as a teacher of substance and dimension? This authority does not derive from the power of the grade book or the crossly phrased word, and certainly it is not authority by demand. So how does one acquire the ability to become a great teacher?

I submit what follows as one path to the goal of quality teaching. It derives from the stuff and substance of a career in education, of learning how to teach, of reflection on improving my teaching, of imparting what I learned to others. It is based on the experiences I had in the classroom, as an administrator, and as the co-creator of two programs in Illinois that recruit and prepare teachers, one by presenting advanced teacher preparation for undergraduates (the Golden Apple Scholars of Illinois) and the other by offering an alternative pathway to teaching for midcareer adults. My quest as a teacher and as part of Golden Apple has been to advance the teaching profession. My goal is to see teaching perceived as a profession of honor that brings resilient and inspiring people into the lives of children who direly need resilience and inspiration.

How do we acquire a generation of quality teachers? Some misstate the process and call it teacher *training*. Dogs are trained. Teachers are prepared. Teacher preparation implies a journey, for becoming a teacher is a journey of thought and of action. A teacher must think about many things long before beginning to teach.

A teacher must reflect before doing and after doing. That sounds simplistic, yet there is preparatory work that allows a teacher to *do*, involving thought and structure.

I have always wanted to write about the ideas and themes of the courses I have presented to prospective teachers. It has been a singular honor to help create pathways to teaching for both undergraduates and mid-career adults. This desire to put down what I know and what I have done became even more acute when my daughter Mary Beth decided she wanted to teach high school English. It is certainly a unique feeling to have trod a certain path in one's professional life, then to glance behind to see your own child following it. While I am thrilled with her path, of course I worry for her as I worry for all who embark on this teaching journey.

We must provide a pathway to success for this new generation of quality teachers. We must work to raise perceptions about the value of the teaching profession in America. What follows is just as much for Mary Beth as it is for all of you who will read this book.

Three decades plus years in education has shown me that the process of becoming a teacher is very much the process of becoming a person. One grows into a stronger knowledge of what it means to be a teacher. One never finishes learning about how best to instruct and how best to inspire students. For those of you who wish to teach, for those of you who wish to inspire others to teach, for those of you young in the profession or those wanting to learn more—your time, by golly, has come.

Interpret what follows as steps along a path, one that must be approached with passion. You must enter the classroom with passion—not with some wild and unfocused enthusiasm, but with a passion formed by

- *Knowing* what you want to accomplish,
- *Seeing* those around you in order to begin properly,
- *Planning* to bring your students to knowledge and understanding,
- *Anticipating* challenges to that plan.

This passion cannot be manufactured. You know when someone is faking it up there by the big desk. The students can spot it even faster. No one wants to be that kind of teacher, not even those whose fatigue and cynicism have led them to fake it.

Think of it: the ineffective teacher does not arise this morning, look in the mirror, and say, “Today, I will be a perfectly horrid teacher. Today, I will hurt children. Today, I will take the path of least resistance. Today, I will dishonor this profession.” No one looks in the mirror and thinks those things. Yet today, this moment, or tomorrow, across the nation, untold numbers of children are being poorly taught by unknown numbers of teachers. You know it’s happening. How do such things happen?

Not to me, you may bluster. I will not be one of those teachers—the ones who perspire rather than inspire during their hour on the stage. Well and good. But how do you get to be good at this? How do you avoid becoming one of them?

So you must have passion, but your passion must be connected to a plan. The philosopher Immanuel Kant (2008) brought his study to three famous questions: “What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?” The teaching passion involves three necessary questions you must always ask:

1. *What* are you doing?
2. *Why* are you doing it?
3. *How* can you improve how you do it?

Becoming proficient at answering the first two questions allows you to entertain the third. Having a clear knowledge of all three enables you to enter a classroom purposefully. That purpose directs you to package your knowledge and your plan in a compelling manner. That compelling manner gives you the necessary insight to look at your students. You thereby become a student of your students. That study allows you to proceed. But even before this thought is considered—you have to get a job! There is plan and structure even with that activity.

## **REFLECTIVE EXERCISE**

For whom are you grateful? List those people and the gifts they have brought to you. Now examine that list. Does what you list define who you are? Is what you list reflected in your teaching?

Keep this list of gifts. What you list will in part define who you are, which will reflect how you teach.