

What Is a Good Teacher?

THE WORDS of a teacher bear so many responsibilities that if all of them were ever present in his mind together he would grow as silent as the grave.

The teacher's responsibility to the student is so huge and heavy a thing that no teacher in his right mind considers it at all. No good teacher, I mean. For a good teacher has had the experience of learning that his words have an effect upon those who sit before him: An effect, it may be, that will endure for decades and, in certain cases, given enough age in the teacher, have indeed endured that long. And it may gratify him to be told of this.

But if he commenced each of his classes by wondering what future actions or thoughts were going to be the result of what he said, if he asked himself seriously what characters he was going to shape, if ever so oddly or so little, he might be terrified before he spoke one word. Normally he is blessed with a healthy indifference to



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such considerations. He is concerned with what he is going to say, and with whether or not it is true.

I scarcely need to explain that the kind of teacher I have in

view is the kind for whom the subject was created. It is his subject; he spends his life thinking about it; whether in or out of class; it is his second if not his first nature; it is what gives him joy. No student ever fails to be aware of this.

A teacher can fool his colleagues; he may even fool his president; but he never fools his students. They know when he loves his subject and when he does not.

They may think such love to be a queer thing, and they may resolve never to fall victim to it themselves; but their respect for it will never cease. And respect for a subject, like respect for an idea, is the beginning of wisdom; or at the very least, respect for the love of a subject.

THE TEACHER'S responsibility to his subject is so serious a thing that it of course precludes anything like a parade of personality for its own sake. The good teacher is not trying to be a personality; he is trying to be a person who understands his subject and sinks himself into it. If he could he would disappear there altogether.

The whimsical teacher — who cares only to impress his brilliance upon his class, or to deliver himself of eccentric opinions in the belief that such opinions are more interesting than know-

ledge would be — immemorably contemptible. His students may like him for a while, but in the end they despise him for his condescension to his subject.

The subject is a third thing that transcends both the teacher and the student. It is what the student should contemplate, and it is what the teacher does contemplate. It is the only living thing in the room.

The truly personal teacher is the most responsible to his subject. Because he knows it to be more important than himself, he is humble in its presence, and would rather die than misrepresent it. It existed before him, and will exist after him; its life is long, though his is short. But if his life is to mean anything it must mean something in connection with his subject; and it had better mean that he has come to understand it as good persons before him have understood it. Good persons know the same things, just they resemble one another.

All men know the same things, or the same thing: the same world.

One might think it easy to do this, but it is so difficult that only a few succeed. We call them great men and women.

What, for instance, is a great poet? One who sees what nobody else does? The contrary is surely true. If Shakespeare is the greatest poet, or if Ho-



mer is, or Dante—I cannot think of a fourth—the reason is not that he saw what nobody ever saw before; he saw what everyone has seen, but with a clarity, an intensity, and finally a humility which makes his subject even more interesting to us than he is.

It was more interesting to him than his own self ever was;

which is why we know so little about him, and why we know so much about the stories he told, the people he understood. Nor are these people strange to us. They are ourselves with different names. If they were not, we should be less absorbed in them than we are.

Their maker disappears behind them, as we do when we

read. They are the folk of this world, and we had not known they were so beautiful or wonderful; nor had we known how much we knew; for what we knew comes home to us now, so that we are proud of the distinction we suddenly discover in ourselves.

SOCRATES was not joking when he said that the only things we learn are the things we already knew. Only we did not know we knew them; we did not know our own power.

So what shall we say of a teacher who makes his students hate Shakespeare?

Impossible though that sounds, the thing has happened.

We shall say first of all that the teacher must have hated Shakespeare too. He only thought he loved him — or worse yet, he pretended that he did. If he really had, there could be no question about the result. His students would love Shakespeare. And the final result

would be that Shakespeare was the only thing they remembered. Not their teacher, who gave them the love, but the object of that love.

The good teacher means it when he says he hopes his students will forget him. He never means, of course, that he hopes they will forget the subject. For him that would be a tragedy; it would mean that he himself had not existed.

The responsibilities of the teacher are many and yet one. They are to himself, to his subject, to his students, to society, and to the truth.

But the first and last of these came nearest to defining the one in which the many reside.

The teacher whose love of truth is personal, is his own, is the teacher all students dream of encountering some day. And even him they will forget. In time, that is to say, they will. Not in eternity, where truth is one unchanging thing and one unchanging Person.

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Learning

A student read that it was possible to absorb know from a book by putting it under your pillow and sleeping on it all night. She tried it and next day a friend asked: "Did you get anything out of sleeping on the book?"

"Yes," replied our girl, "a stiff neck."

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