

The Downsides of Being a Teacher for Me (And Maybe for You)

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In recent days (it's late March of 2017), I read a couple of good books on teaching. One is an early novel by John Updike, 1963, *The Centaur*. I know enough about Updike's life to be certain that one of the characters in the book, a secondary school teacher, was based on his father. The other book, non-fiction, new at this writing, is the writer Nicholson Baker's account of a month he spent substitute teaching in the public schools at the middle grades and high school levels around where he lives in Maine.

What I especially took to in both books is that they dealt with the effects of teaching on the teacher, not just on the students. I was a teacher for, my gosh, 51 years, five in a high school and the rest in colleges of education, retiring going on two years ago. The teachers involved—Updike's father and Baker—were artsy, sensitive types like me and I could relate to what happened to them. The two books got me thinking about the effects teaching all those years had on me. This writing is a report on what came out of that.

Teaching, the field of education in general, was rewarding for me in many ways, but I'm not going to focus on that here. Rather, I'll deal with what I have come to see more clearly than when I was doing it the downsides of teaching for me. I'm not contending the issues and challenges I identify in these next pages are inherent in teaching, that they will be there for everyone who teaches. The outcome of any endeavor, teaching or anything else, is a function of an exchange between a particular human being and a particular circumstance at a particular time. What came out of teaching for me was the result of the interplay between me and the schools and classrooms in Minnesota and Vermont in which I worked from the mid-1960s to 2015, at that time in history; the outcome would have been different if any of those elements had been different. That acknowledged, I'll generalize where it seems warranted, offer

that something or another is, or could possibly be, characteristic of teaching, and I invite you the reader to do the same.

I hope what I say about myself in these pages prompts you to reflect on the impact your vocation, or the one you are contemplating, is having, or will have, on the nature and quality of your life, and not just your working life, your life overall. I tend to be an analytical type, so I thought about a lot of what I'll get into here while I was teaching, and, with reasonable effectiveness, acted accordingly. But now, looking back on my career, I wish I had confronted the matters I discuss in these next pages with greater intensity and rigor. Speaking of Updike, last night I read a short story of his ("Personal Archeology") in which the central character is "an old man living out his days harmlessly." That's me now. If it isn't you, take advantage of it; the clock is ticking and it can never be set back or rewound.

To begin, I distinguish a pick from a choice. I picked teaching as a career. I didn't really choose it. A pick is a selection without much thought behind it: that movie playing at the Cineplex looks pretty good, I'll see that one; that kind of thing. In contrast, a choice is a selection informed by a sound understanding of oneself and the various possible options and a careful consideration of their consequences.

I was twenty years old, from a working class background, coming out of a difficult personal circumstance growing up, lost and alone, my parents had just died, an anonymous sophomore at the University of Minnesota, 50,000 students, nobody knew or cared that I was there. I had no idea who I really was and had no vision of what I could become and achieve in my life. I had to make a living somehow, and I didn't want to be a barber like my dad—stand erect with my hands in the air cutting people's hair while they sat in a chair reading a magazine. I knew about high school teaching because I'd gone to high school. I liked sports. I'll teach in a high school, history (which I had no interest in and knew nothing about), and do some coaching, so I thought--if it

warrants being called thought; more, it was a fleeting impression. No discussions with anybody, no pondering. One afternoon like any other, I walked into an office (I wonder now how I found it) and applied for the university's teacher education program. I filled out a form and handed it to the person working at the front desk, and then I'm sure, went alone to the McDonald's right near campus, McDonald's were which just starting up then, this was the early 1960s, 12 cents for a hamburger, and wolfed down two hamburgers and a large order of fries and a Coke and read the Minneapolis Tribune newspaper's sport section.

As it turned out, my low grade point average in the courses I'd taken up to that point got me rejected when I first applied for teacher training. A big problem, the quarter before I applied--the University of Minnesota was on the quarter system, three quarters during the academic year—I had gotten terribly sick with, as it turned out, mononucleosis near the end of the semester—for the first four of the ten days I spent in the hospital they thought I had meningitis, I was jaundiced, yellow. Instead of reporting my illness to the university and requesting extensions on my courses, which should have been the obvious thing to do, I just passively let them turn into F's. So sad looking back on it.

Whoever I talked to at the education office said I could re-apply for the teacher education program later on if I got my grade point average up. That invitation and possibility turned out to be a gift, because for the first time in my life, I gave attention to my studies. The next quarter I got all A's, and that set the pattern for the rest of my undergraduate years and my masters and Ph.D programs—a string of A's.

I had picked up the idea along the way growing up that a nobody and nothing like me should stay in my place—down near the bottom and over on the side, which included slacking off in school. I've since learned that a lot of young people, and adults too, from low-income and difficult backgrounds see themselves that way. It's an obscured phenomenon for the whites among them because it is assumed that they are privileged; total bullshit.

I'm really smart. That's just the way it is. But I was taught, now I realize, by both my family life and my place in the social class pecking order to be dumb. It's been a lifetime challenge for me to live out the advice of the playwright David Mamet: if you are smart, be smart.

I remember as a freshman in the university taking a science course and being told, "Don't even try to get a good grade in here. This is a course the pre-meds take." The tacit message: they aren't a scruffy lower class type like you; stay in your place. I took that admonition to heart and skipped classes and didn't prepare much at all for the exams and got a D in the course (which contributed to the ed school turndown). Oh how I wish I could turn back time and take on those entitled pre-meds in that science class. But a point I'm making in this context: that's not going to happen. We all have but one shot at life, no do-overs.

Writing this, I realize I want to pass on advice. If this section at all hits home for you, reader, whatever personal and social circumstances you come out of, I invite you to choose your way forward in life, and dare to shoot for the skies and be every bit as smart as you are.

I didn't realize it back then, but going into the teaching profession I was doing more than just choosing (or better, picking) a way to make a living; I was taking on an identity as a person. Think of what you perceive, what thoughts go through your mind, when, say in the supermarket or at a social gathering, you come upon a high school teacher or college professor. If it were the same person but in a different occupation—say, a doctor or a plumber or a film director—you'd see him differently, and you'd treat him differently. (I'll use "he" in this piece to avoid cumbersome "he and she" sentence constructions.) And the way you and others see and treat him would affect how he saw himself; people are shaped by others' reactions to them.

When I went into teaching, all I had in my head was an image of a classroom and working with students, and, to a lesser

extent, a sport context as a coach, and the idea that teaching and coaching were things I could do, and they seemed better than being a claims adjuster for an insurance company. (The claims adjuster illustration in this last sentence comes to mind because that was the job I applied for just before I got hired for my first teaching job at North Saint Paul high school.)

What I never thought about, and wish I had, was that going into teaching I was choosing who to be in the world and, in large measure, who I was to myself—a teacher, a helper, a caretaker of children and, five years later on a university faculty, young adults. I was assuming a social services persona and place in the world, and, really, forging my destiny. So much was at stake, now I realize, but it didn't enter my mind at that time, and there was no one back then who cared enough to bring it to my attention.

A big issue for me, I eventually came to understand, is the life of a teacher, that identity, that persona, that way of being, that position in the grand scheme of things, runs up against my basic nature. As the years went along, I experienced this lack of fit in a gross, inarticulate way. I never put words to it until I was in mid-life; until then, it remained a diffuse, felt, overall sense that something was off, not right, with my life. I wasn't enthused about or gratified by what was going on with me, I felt that, I lived that. And the people around me at work, faculty and students and administrators, weren't very excited about me. I have been hum to them all the way through my career in teaching.

Simply, I wasn't happy as a teacher. Which is not to say I was unhappy; but I wasn't happy either. I've decided a major challenge, none bigger, for all of us is to arrange our affairs so that the outcome is personal happiness. Happiness is Nature's way of saying we are doing something right in our lives. If we aren't happy, something needs to be changed.

In mid-life, mid-career—I was a forty-year old associate professor of education, one more promotion left, to full professor, which eventually did happen—somehow I got up the motivation and energy to go to the student services office at the university and

take career interest inventories, which were paired up with a single session with a counselor to go over the results. It was a free service with my job. The idea with the inventories was to compare my interests and preferences with those of people who are successful in a variety of fields of work. Needless to say, this is something I wish I had done at twenty rather than at forty, but at least I did it.

The basic findings didn't surprise me, but there it was in on paper and that gave it weight, credibility, validity. It was stark and bifurcated: for me, the arts and creative endeavors generally were very high, and the social service/helping ones, like teaching, were very low; and there I was in a social service/helping profession. Bottom line, while I was nominally successful in what I was doing, a professor with tenure, my name on an office door, I was a misfit, out of place, and paying the price people pay who aren't where they ought to be in their lives.

More advice: the best you can, find work that aligns with the person you truly are. And, while I'm at it, I'll add do the same thing with love. Get work and love right--and take care of your health--and you've gone a long way toward creating a good life for yourself in your one shot at it. Of course, that is much easier said than done, but that's your job.

Not only does a career choice involved taking on an identity, it goes a long way in determining with whom you associate: your colleagues and friends, even whom you marry. And it is a powerful determinant of your audience, whom you play your life to, and how you go about doing that, and what ideas, values, and ways of being come to your attention, and how you are viewed and treated by the world; and over time, that shapes how you see yourself and what you think and do.

Most of my career was spent with university people in a college of education—faculty, administrators, and students--and I'll focus on them in this writing. Before I do that, though, I feel the need to reiterate that much good came out of my associations

with others in schools; I don't want what's here to obscure that. But that said, I think it is important to get on the table the issues, problems, challenges, which resulted from my professional and personal contacts in my work I education. I'll list some of the major ones here and how I have dealt with them.

Ironically given that I was working in schools, neither the high school nor college of education settings encouraged or supported my intellectual and personal expansion. In my work as a teacher, I wasn't challenged to inform and stretch my mind or to become who I uniquely am at my finest.

In both the high school and colleges of education, the faculty had a social services mindset. They were helpers, not intellectuals. As they saw it, they knew as much as they needed to get about their mission: teaching young people and making society a better place. They weren't pushing out the frontier of knowledge, creating anything new, pressing beyond their own professional cutting edge, or trying to become more than they are as people. The talk around the lunch table or in the faculty room wasn't about the latest idea or novel or film, but rather how the class was going and, frankly, reiterating conventional wisdom about education and the state of the world.

Candidly, few of the teachers I have been around have struck me as being among the best and the brightest as people. With few exceptions, top caliber individuals don't go into education. People like that, and I expect this applies to Nicholson Baker, are not going to spend their lives relating to well intentioned but pedestrian colleagues in a high school or college of education. A month, the time Baker spent in schools, is more than enough for people like him.

As for students, they were sixteen and twenty and twenty-three and not up to, or of mind to, challenge me intellectually or prompt me to become more than I was. Every year they stayed the same age and I got older—twenty-three and then twenty-four and then twenty-five, and then forty-five and fifty-five. Recently, I

saw a Netflix documentary called “Magicians: Life in the Impossible.” It was about four magicians whose lives were given over to performing the same tricks over and over and over to a mildly interested and bemused but basically disengaged audience, who, when the show was over, backs-turned to the performer, filed out of the theater and went about doing what really mattered to them in their lives, leaving the magician alone packing up his gear and then getting in his car and going home to whatever was in the refrigerator. There has been this magic-act performance quality to teaching for me for the whole of the half-century I spent doing it, and, even though I didn’t consciously acknowledge it, there was a slight sadness and emptiness I lived with all that time.

Increasingly as the years went along, I attended to nurturing and expressing my unique being, which my work in teaching wasn’t encouraging me to do. Every semester, I created a curriculum, as it were, for myself: books to read and films to see, people to contact, and projects to complete. I lived out my artistic bent by becoming an actor and director in amateur theater productions; and I wasn’t dabbling with this, I seriously engaged these activities. The world of teaching is about words on a page, talk, and writing; it is very alienated from the body. When I was still young enough to do it, I got involved in modern dance and joined a dance company; here too, I wasn’t kidding around, I was really committed and involved. Older, I did martial arts, and I have done yoga regularly for many years now. I found the professional journals in education to be essentially reiterations of the same old, same old, and confining, too circumscribed in focus, and the articles were little more than graduate school papers. I created this web site to give me a vehicle for expressing myself the very best I can with regard to all that I care about, and to learn and grow and experience satisfaction in the process. Whatever this site has meant to readers, it has been a godsend to me.

All the way through my half-century in teaching, there have been “right answers” (in quotes because I eventually decided that they

were, in fact, wrong answers, either generally or for me in particular).

One “right answer” was an orientation, a perspective, an outlook, a philosophy, called progressive education. At every level, from grade school to graduate school, progressive education is unquestionably *the* action: it’s Truth with a capital T, no doubt about it, no need to talk about; just get about the business of implementing it. I won’t go into progressive education’s tenets beyond noting that its patron saint John Dewey (1859-1952) was a committed leftist who was particularly taken by the Stalin regime’s schooling reforms in the Soviet Union. Not that most educators, including at the university, know that about Dewey. To them he, in Martin Luther King’s words, had “seen the promised land,” that’s all you need to know about him. You don’t debate John Dewey any more than you debate Martin Luther King; you have a day for him. In my college of education, there is a John Dewey day every year.

Progressive education has a favorable ring to it if you don’t think about it too hard or look too closely at the results of its implementation. Ironically since its adherents congratulate themselves on being on the side of the little guy, it particularly shortchanges low income and minority people. If you are interested, I get into my critique of progressive education, as well as my overall take on schooling, in a 2010 article in the writings section of this site entitled “A Needed Paradigm Shift in Education.”

Incidentally, while I am convinced of the merits of the Paradigm Shift writing, it never would have been accepted by a professional journal, or by a university or commercial book publisher. Simply, you don’t knock John Dewey or progressive education and get it in print in the mainline outlets in the field of education. Luckily for me, I thought the “right way” when I was going through the tenure track process on everything, including progressive education, so I appeared in the top journals and got my books published and was accepted to give presentations at

conferences. Otherwise, I would never have gotten promoted and tenured at the university. It is still a fact of life for young academics: go along with the party line or you're reading the help-wanted ads over your morning coffee.

I concluded that the best education for students, including and especially those from less advantaged backgrounds, is old fashioned, content-and-character, traditional schooling. See the 2008 site writing "Traditionalist Education: A Needed Emphasis."

It became clear to me that I needed to find a way of looking at my work that suited my artistic personal orientation and my artful rather than social service teaching approach. I've gotten direction and inspiration from the writings and personal example of the American painter and educator Robert Henri (1855-1929)--see my 2008 site writing, "Robert Henri on Education." A label I came up with for my overall perspective is autotelic education (see my 2009 writing, "Autotelic Education: A Concept").

Throughout my career in education, a left-of-center mindset has prevailed. At the high school level, and remember this was way back in the 1960s, it was basically a "the Democrats have it wired" mentality, and, with increasing dominance, and insistence, at the university a neo-Marxist perspective has prevailed--though I never heard university faculty publicly or privately refer to neo-Marxism, or as it is referred to popularly, political correctness. For one thing, both Marxism and political correctness have pejorative connotations. But more than that, labels weren't deemed necessary, because as with Deweyism, or neo-Deweyism, no label is necessary since its tenets are thought to be unimpeachably valid. It's not these ideas versus some other ideas, and thus open for debate; it's Truth and Justice versus the Forces of Darkness, case closed, you don't argue about that. Anybody who doesn't go along the One Best Way is behind the times, wrong-headed, or evil. It's a matter of being a good guy or bad guy, a hero or a villain, what side are you on, simple as that; no need for labels.

There was a remarkable lack of dialogue and debate in the university during the time I spent there, especially the last couple of decades. It was more akin to a church, where the gospel was preached, testimonies were given, and crusades were organized. From a 2014 essay I wrote for this site called “Poking Around in the Manosphere:

There is much talk about transforming society in the direction we all know it needs to go. We share a mission, every last one of us (don't we? yes, we do): social justice, diversity, ending racial, ethnic, gender, and economic inequities and oppression. And we know who's doing the oppressing, those white men and their misguided and malevolent ways over there (over there, not the men in the room—or, well, maybe one), and cleaning up the environment and achieving sustainability while we are at it. We are all in agreement on that, aren't we? Yes, we are. Today's meeting, today's mass email, is not going to be about groundbreaking or iconoclastic scholarship--we already know the Truth; our job is to find ways to implement it. Academic freedom and integrity are not going to be punched up--they just prop up troublemakers, and we don't like troublemakers.

You have problems with any of this? Are you sure you want to be here?

I'm sorry it took so long, but at around fifty I started thinking about where I stood on the political/cultural beliefs spectrum. I found that my outlook to be a mix of conservatism, libertarianism, and Jeffersonianism (Thomas Jefferson). (Check Amazon for books by Russell Kirk and Ayn Rand, and look up Joseph Ellis' biography on Jefferson, *American Sphinx*.) I re-discovered and affirmed, and really for the first time made sense of, the personal growth-oriented Human Potential Movement, which had a very strong influence on me during my doctoral studies years. (See the August, 2011 site thought, “On est and the Human Potential Movement.”) Two other site readings: “A Case for Conservative Schooling” (2011); and “Critical Theory in the American University: A Critical Issue” (2013).

It occurred to me that every group had its advocates in the university, and in the culture and society generally, except European heritage, white, people. Whites are denigrated in our time. I am white and I decided that my race is something to be proud of and support, and I have been conditioned to believe that it is something to be ashamed of and abandon. I started writing about whites from a position of respect and concern, and at times I advocated for them, and when the occasion justified it, I spoke up in classes about the status and wellbeing of white people, including white students in the university. Needless to say, that didn't play well at all in the university, or in the wider society. The last fifteen years of my teaching career, demonization, marginalization, and harassment were big parts of my life, and it took a heavy personal toll on me. But I never backed down in the face of what was going on, and I'm proud of myself for that. Some writings: the book *The Fame of a Dead Man's Deeds*, which is available free on the home page of this site; the 2016 article, "From a Chat to Meta-Politics"; and the 2014 article, "Joseph K., Kenny Rogers, and Me."

The last couple of decades, my college of education work setting was dominated by women and their ways. From "Poking into the Manosphere":

I had just come from a faculty meeting in the college of education where I am a professor, and of the eighty or so faculty and administrators in attendance, by my count upwards of seventy of them were women (I can remember when in was fifty-fifty men and women, but retirements and discriminatory hiring over the last twenty years have changed that), and as far as I can tell, every last one of them is a modern sister. The few men present—none of whom were in front of the room conducting the meeting, and collectively they said virtually nothing—are, my take on it, active members in the modern sisters auxiliary. It didn't strike me that if these men hadn't been in their university jobs they'd be Navy SEALs, if you

know what I mean. And I'm not excluding myself from these generalizations. I've spent my life embedded among feminist women and their male sedan chair bearers, and to presume that I have escaped being shaped by that experience would be kidding myself. If alpha and beta are on a continuum, you can locate me well past the midline on the beta side.

Modern feminism is not so much talked about in my context as it is an accepted Truth, the Gospel, case closed, let's get on with it. Beyond feminism per se, the setting has a feminine, feminized, ethos. To illustrate, not that she's mentioned explicitly any more, in years past she was, the ideas of Nell Noddings, who is now a professor emeritus at Stanford, first articulated in her book, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, pervade the walk and talk of the college. That is to say, there's a strong press toward compassion, caring for others, nurturance, inclusion, fitting into the group, altruism, and peaceful and comfortable human relationships, and security and safety—what might be called soft virtues, in contrast to hard virtues such as personal autonomy, self-reliance, honor, standing out from the crowd, courage, toughness, rigor, exactness, persistence, exemplary accomplishment, and adventure and risk.

The book *Manhood at Harvard: William James and Others* by Kim Townsend about went on in Harvard around 1890 has been helpful to me. I wrote about it in “Poking into the Manosphere”:

Heavy hitters—among them, Charles Eliot, Harvard's president, and faculty members William James, and George Santayana—took the university's role in making a man deadly seriously; it was right at the top of their agenda of concerns. The ideal man in their eyes was healthy, lean, lithe, alert, graceful, and action-oriented. He possessed a powerful and fierce physicality and presence. He was an effective leader when it was called for and a dutiful follower when it was called for. . . .

Those Harvard men back then wrote and spoke about the development of a gentleman. A gentleman in their minds is dignified, polite, respectful to woman; he honors them, he

protects them, and he looks out for his children, and he's a good husband and father—he doesn't run around on anybody, and he doesn't run out on anybody. He doesn't entertain you with his wiggles in the end zone or dazzle you with his haircut and slick pick-up moves at a bar, but if he says he'll be home at six, count on it.

Reading the Townsend book surfaced the question for me, when was the last time I heard the word “gentleman”? For that matter, how often do I hear the word “man” these years? My father was a man; I'm a male, or better, a white male—a dehumanizing, objectifying, and pejorative label, come to think about it. A good pre-condition for hurting someone, breaking him to the saddle (or the cart), taking what he's got, or taking his place, whatever you are up to, is to define him as akin to a animal rather than a human being; as a thing, a type, a category, rather than a unique person; and as, by definition, bad. At Harvard way back when, they talked about what makes for a man, a gentle man, a gentleman, and it might be good for those of us alive now to also think in those terms, including about ourselves.

Needless to say, the ethos in Harvard circa 1890 and my university contrasted markedly, with the result that my manhood took a hit, no doubt in my mind. I'm working on it.

The John Updike and Nicholson Baker books that led off this writing reminded me of the downsides of spending my adult life, day after day, year after year, decade after decade, in classrooms with students who, whatever else they may have picked up in school, had become experts at minimal engagement, disconfirmation, sabotage, and passive aggression. Baker comes off as a sensitive, vulnerable, self-critical type—I can relate. He recounts addressing himself “You hopeless jackass” in the restroom mirror, and saying out loud to himself in the car, “I'm hurtin' real bad.” I can relate to that too. Really, Baker got set up for this. If I were a consultant and the people who ran the schools asked me how to arrange schooling in order to

make teachers the least empowered and most put upon, I'd tell them to stick with the current arrangement, it's nigh on perfect in that regard.

As we all are, I was shaped by my experiences, in this case in classrooms, and, the focus here, in some negative ways. A particular problem for me has been carrying over into my personal life tendencies, predilections, that came out of dealing with students. Here in no particular order—I wrote them out as they came to me--are ten things about myself I found I needed to work on while I was teaching. In many cases, these issues persist in my dealings with others.

- *I'll Walk.* There's no tenuousness in the teacher-student relationship from the teacher's side. The student can take the class or drop it, but the teacher isn't going anywhere. Short of a student assault and battery against him, the teacher is back tomorrow, upbeat and pitching his wares. The socialization of a teacher is to never quit on a student. No matter what he does, you keep trying to make it work. You hang in there . . . and hang in there and hang in there and hang in there and hang in there. In any context, if you know someone is going to stay around with a smiling face no matter what you do, that gives you license to turn loose your basest instincts, and more than a few students take advantage of that reality. Students pull stunts on teachers (and, I might add, parents, who also are going stick around no matter what) that would get them out the door with anyone else, and that goes a long way in explaining what goes on in classrooms.

Without thinking about it, I found myself employing the teacher norm—I'm here for the duration no matter what you do—in my personal relationships. I saw--and see, it's still an issue—the need to up my standards significantly around whom I let into my life and what I expect and will tolerate from people.

In teaching, there's no screening: if the student is in the class, you deal with him, period; you're available to him, you give him

time and energy. Under that set up, you wind up spending much of your time futilely trying to turn around the uninterested and unimpressed, and getting drained and lessened in the process.

In my personal life, I have to be a better screener: the right ones for me in; the wrong ones for me out. People who are right for me celebrate me; they don't merely endure me. They understand me, value me, and believe in me. They are helpmates, not critics. They lift me up, not drag me down. They enrich me, not deplete me. They are sources of good ideas, inspiration, opportunities, encouragement, positive experiences, accomplishments, and acknowledgment. Being around them makes me feel good about myself. It makes me happy. Wherever possible and ethical, I need to replace negative relationships, negative people, with positive ones.

To put it simply, I need to walk—both away and toward. In teaching, my feet were stuck in cement. They shouldn't be in the rest of my life.

- *Row the Boat.* It was my class. I was responsible for how it went. Essentially students took a seat and responded to what I had come up with to do, and often the response was for all practical purposes a non-response, or it was minimal effort, and, in some cases, sly or even outright resistance. I've had the propensity to allow that arrangement to prevail in the rest of my life. I had to, have to, get better at holding other people accountable for how things go with us. I'll work at it full out; but you do the same thing.

In teaching, there was the idea that a teacher can make things happen without students' commitment and hard work. A fantasy. I'm not omnipotent, and I'm going to pretend to be. And at least in my personal life, now in my life, I have the option to stop rowing the boat altogether if others don't grab an oar and go at it hard.

- *Cut the Act.* Teaching, I wasn't really myself. I was smiling, upbeat Jimmy Fallon: interviewing, keeping in going, entertaining

the crowd. Then there was Mr. Rogers (are you old enough to remember him on public television?)—benign, inoffensive, safe, nice guy, kind of a neuter. And then there was Tucker Carlson, the guy on FOX--debater, opinionizer extraordinaire, gadfly. And Albert Einstein—fountain of knowledge and wisdom. And Mother Theresa—nurturer of the world. Oh, come off it. Finally, just the last few years, I was myself in the classroom, and, I must admit, to my surprise things went way better. At least I didn't feel like a phony.

Oh yes, one last one, there was Mr. Motor-mouth, and he's still with us. Teachers talk and talk and talk. One thing I'm dealing with now, almost two years after leaving teaching, is shutting the hell up.

- *Sally Field Goes*. Sally Field won for best actress in a leading role at the 1984 Academy Awards. Her effusive gratefulness in her acceptance speech has gone down in history. Waving her arms, ecstatic, with a smile as wide as a lottery winner's, she proclaimed to everyone present, "I've wanted more than anything to have your respect. This time I feel it. I can't deny the fact that you like me. Right now, you like me!" There is enormous emphasis in teaching in being respected and liked by students, and I mean *really* respected and liked by them. You can't just do your job of creating rich opportunities to learn and supporting the students who take advantage of them. You have to be revered, idolized. If just one student isn't enchanted with you, just one, that's a problem you have to fix this minute, job one. I decided that if I'm soberly doing my best at what I think is the right thing for me to do, in teaching or anywhere else, whether or not you like what I'm doing and hold me in high regard is your business not mine.

- *Harvard, 1890*. Remember the reference earlier to the Kim Townsend book on the concept of a man that prevailed at Harvard in the late nineteenth century? "Healthy, lean, lithe, alert, graceful,

and action-oriented” . . . “A powerful and fierce physicality and presence” . . . “An effective leader when it was called for and a dutiful follower when it was called for” . . . “A gentleman” . . .

And there was my comment, “Doesn’t entertain you with his wiggles in the end zone.” There’s a lot in teaching that can undercut manliness. Teaching can be an emasculating undertaking. Anybody that redefines or subverts me as a man, I’ve got a problem with them. I tap-dance for nobody. I’m not your foil, object of derision, tackling dummy, or litter bearer. I wasn’t put in this earth to take crap—I take zero crap. I’m a man. Get it?

- *How Am I Doing?* Teaching is all about the wellbeing of students. You are there for them. They are what matters, not you; that’s the word in the profession. I’m not sacrificial to anybody. I count. My needs matter. My welfare and happiness is on the agenda. What am I doing for you? Yes, let’s look at that. But let’s also look at what are you doing for me. The measure of this relationship we’re in is the extent to which it uplifts us both. It doesn’t go just one way: I contribute to you, and I do my best with that; but at the same time, you contribute to me, and you do your best with that.

- *It’s Hip to Be Square.* An old song by a group called Huey Lewis and the News. There is a big emphasis in teaching on relating to students’ world and looking good to them. I found myself giving over time and energy to keeping up with the popular culture, the latest thing, the hot celebrity, and, this is pathetic, trying to be cool in the eyes of my students. I don’t think I ever needed to do any of that in order to teach well, but I thought I did. I’m finding that one of the positive things about being retired from teaching is I can just let read my Chekhov short stories and watch my ‘70s French art house films and let the rest of it go. Is Katy Perry still big?

- *Be Here Now*. The title of an old book by someone who calls himself Ram Dass (real name, Richard Alpert). Teaching involves being in your head, as it were, including during off hours: planning lessons, figuring out what's going on with students and the course, monitoring how the class discussion is going and making adjustments. What's happening, what happened yesterday, what's going to happen tomorrow, how's it going, how am I doing, etc., etc., etc.

These days, I'm working on being present, alive, in this place and time, turning off all the chatter on my head, experiencing this precious moment, this reality, just that, only that. The word for it is mindfulness, being mindful. I'm meditating now, learning to sit quietly, I'm calming down, letting go, just being. I'm not running frantically as I remember my pet hamster doing on a spinning metal wheel when I was a kid, and that I did all those years as a teacher. I eventually figured out that I could teach just as well—in fact, better—absent the hamster number, but it was very late in the game before I came to that realization.

- *In the Ring*. I took a lot of hits when I was teaching, and they did major damage. All my life, I've had the propensity to roll up in a ball or hide out instead of standing up for myself, and that made things even worse. And nobody was on my case looking out for me. I was like a boxer entangled in the ropes taking punches with no referee around to intervene. Right toward the end, I did start fighting back—see my site April, 2014 site thought “On Fighting Up Close”.

An August, 2015 thought for this site is called “On the Boxer.” It's contains lyrics, absent any commentary by me, from the song “The Boxer,” recorded in the late 1960s by Simon and Garfunkel.

In the clearing stands a boxer
And a fighter by his trade
And he carries the reminders

Of ev'ry glove that laid him down
And cut him till he cried out
In his anger and his shame
"I am leaving, I am leaving."
But the fighter still remains.

I was talking about myself here. I had just left teaching a couple of months before and I was carrying "the reminders" of what I had gone through, especially in the last decade when my racial views and writings, to stay with the boxing metaphor, evoked a torrent of punches. Now, almost two years later, while I'm in much better shape, I've still got a ways to go, and I'm realizing that many injuries never completely heal, and scars are always visible.

I employed the boxer metaphor in a site thought a few months before "On the Boxer." A January, 2015 thought for the site called "On Losing My Mind"—ended with this:

More than ever I feel it'd be OK to let go, to quit trying to make it happen, to quit running after it, after them, to leave the arena and just sit by the water. Relax your shoulders, R., let them fall. Get out of your boxer's stance. Retire from the ring.

And that's what I did.

- *I'm Fine as I Am.* I tried to emulate just about every conception of what a teacher is supposed be like. I wasn't up to pulling any of them off, and I shouldn't have been trying to. Finally, just the last few years, it came to me that, just possibly, I didn't have to do somebody else to be a good teacher, that I could be a good teacher, even a exemplary teacher, doing me. Me. Just as I am. I could be fine as I am. And it turned out I was. How about that! It was liberating, exhilarating.

That last bullet point seems a good place to end, with the affirmation that I'm fine as I am. And it goes beyond teaching. All my life I've been told that I'm not fine as the person I am.

In the second grade, seven years old, for some reason I never understood, I was told by my teacher to go stand, away from her and the other children, in the cloakroom, a narrow room adjacent to the classroom where students hung their coats and stored their personal items, bags and overshoes and such. I spent a good part of the second grade standing amid the hung coats in a narrow unlighted passageway, seven years old, silent, alone, numb. The pattern persisted throughout my life, every step of the way, including in my teaching life: he's flawed, he's wrong, he's bad, he's less, he's nothing, he doesn't belong here, he doesn't matter, he deserves to be hurt, go away. I read surveys that ask people, what was your greatest accomplishment in life. My greatest accomplishment, and it took the whole of my life to achieve it, was to become, to myself, regardless of what you or anyone else thinks or does, right now sitting here in front of this laptop, fine as I am.