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SELECTION 12

To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher

William C. Ayers

In his pedagogical memoir, *To Teach*, Bill Ayers writes: "The challenge of teaching is to decide who you want to be as a teacher, what you care about and what you value, and how you will conduct yourself in classrooms with students. It is to name yourself as a teacher, knowing that institutional realities will only enable that goal in part (if at all) and that the rest is up to you. It is to move beyond the world as we find it with its conventional patterns and its received wisdom in pursuit of a world and a reality that could be, but is not yet" (p. 23). With so many teacher education programs adopting a technical-administrative perspective for preparation, Ayers calls upon students to imagine what type of teacher they wish to become, a question to be raised during the first year of teaching as well as during one's last year.

William Ayers is distinguished professor of education and director of the Center for Youth and Society at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His other publications include *The Good Preschool Teacher* (1989), *A Kind and Just Parent: The Children of Juvenile Court* (1997), *A Simple Justice: The Challenge of Small Schools* (2000), *Fugitive Days* (2001), and *Teaching toward Freedom: Moral Commitment and Ethical Action in the Classroom* (2004).

The selected excerpt, "Beginning Again: The Current Challenge to Teach," offers a self-contained statement: Ayers' inspirational call to teach stresses the important and honorable work of teachers. Living a life of social agency, praxis (as Dewey used the term), community building, and experimentation, Ayers is constantly seeking and striving to better the quality of life for students and for teachers. Ayers writes, "As long as I live I am under construction, becoming a teacher, learning to teach, practicing the art and craft of teaching. I'm still trying to achieve wonderfulness. Good teachers, then, are what they are not yet, and so their first and firmest rule is to reach" (p. 141).

Key concept(s): teachers' self-conception

Citation: William C. Ayers, from *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*, 2d ed. (Teachers College Press, 2001)

Beginning Again: The Current Challenge to Teach

"If I only had a home . . . a heart . . . a brain . . . the nerve."

The four hopeful seekers skipping together down the yellow brick road toward Oz sing their desires to one another and to the heavens. Each has diagnosed a deficiency, identified a lack, recognized a need. Each has become painfully conscious of something missing, a hole in need of repair. Each is stirred to action against an obstacle to his or her fullness, and each gathers momentum and power from the others, from intimate relationship forged through collective struggle.

This is not a bad start for teachers seeking a vocabulary of basic qualities in their quest for wholeness and for goodness in teaching—a home, a heart, a brain, the nerve. There is more, to be sure, but these can send you skipping down your own yellow brick roads into the wide, wide world beyond.

Teaching is intellectual and ethical work; it takes a thoughtful, reflective, and caring person to do it well. It takes a brain and a heart. The first and fundamental challenge for teachers is to embrace students as three-dimensional creatures, as distinct human beings with hearts and minds and skills and dreams and capacities of their own, as people much like ourselves. This embrace is initially an act of faith—we must assume capacity even when it is not immediately apparent or visible, we must hew to "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen"—because we work most often in schools where aggregating and grouping kids on the flimsiest evidence is the reigning common-sense, where the toxic habit of labeling youngsters on the basis of their deficits is a common place. A teacher needs a brain to break through the cotton wool smothering the mind, to see beyond the

blizzard of labels to this specific child, trembling and whole and real, and to this one, and then to this. And a teacher needs a heart to fully grasp the importance of that gesture, to recognize in the deepest core of your being that every child is precious, each induplicable, the one and only who will ever trod this earth, deserving of the best a teacher can give—respect, awe, reverence, commitment.

A teacher who takes up this fundamental challenge is a teacher working against the grain—you've got to have the nerve. All the pressures of schooling push teachers to act as clerks and functionaries—interchangeable parts in a vast and gleaming and highly rationalized production line. To teach with a heart and a brain—to see education as a deeply humanizing enterprise, to teach toward opening infinite possibilities for your students—requires courage. Courage is a quality nurtured in solidarity with others—it is an achievement of people coming together freely to choose something better. In order to teach with thought and care and courage, you really need a home.

The four seekers lurching toward Oz remind us that the obstacles to our fullness as teachers will change as we develop, that there will always be more to know, always more to become, and that in our quest we must reach out for allies and friends to give us strength and power and courage to move on. And we can now know in advance that there is no wizard at the end of the road, no higher power with a magic wand to solve our all-too-human-problems. Recognizing that the people with the problems are also the people with the solutions, and that waiting for the law-makers, the system, or the union to "get it right" before we get it right is to wait a lifetime. We can look inside ourselves, then, summon strengths we never knew we had, connect up with other seekers—teachers and parents and kids—to create the schools and classrooms we deserve—thoughtful places of decency, sites of peace and freedom and justice. We are on the way, then, to our own real Emerald Cities.

We know that teaching is intellectual and ethical work. Good teachers find ways to stay alert—wide-awake—to the lives of their students. "Kidwatching" is a learnable skill that begins with a disposition of mind, an attitude, an unshakable belief that every child is a full human being, complex and dynamic, a three-dimensional creature with a heart, a spirit, an active, meaning-making mind, with hopes and aspirations that must be taken into account. Good teachers honor their students and spend, some key energy figuring out how they think, experience, and make sense of the world. Good teachers, then, become students of their students in order to create more vital opportunities for real learning.

A central challenge is to see children whole, and then to create classrooms in which the visibility of persons is a common place. This is never easy; it is made excruciatingly difficult in schools where the toxic habit of labeling kids, of summing them up on the basis of a single quality or a narrow band of demonstratable skills, fragments them, constrains the visual field, and renders them opaque. An antidote to this dismal state of affairs is *kidwatching*, a faith in the proposition that all human beings have skills and capacity and experiences worthy of our attention, and the ability to observe with patience and discipline in order to intervene appropriately and with confidence. Kidwatching requires an unblinking attention to and a passionate regard for children. It means looking beyond deficit to capacity, and beyond the classroom to the world our students inhabit. The genuine and often informal out-of-school curriculum can be a source of deep understanding for what might make classroom learning take root and come alive. Children and youth are embedded in families, after all, in neighborhoods, cultural surrounds, language communities, an historic flow, an economic condition, an entire world. Kidwatchers need to bring that world into focus—a world in some important ways out of balance, in need of repair—as it smothers and challenges and shapes and touches the child.

Learning to kidwatch is an antidote, as well, to the pervasive feeling of powerlessness teachers sometimes experience in schools. No one can entirely control how you see your children—we may be manipulated, constrained, and oppressed in some aspects of our work, but we are free to awaken our minds and our hearts based on our own deepest beliefs about teaching and our own highest hopes for our students. We are freer than we sometimes know to create and enhance the environments we inhabit in order to embody our values and our dreams for our children. We can, in our journey into teaching, reach out to children and families, reach out, as well, to our colleagues as allies to create a life-long project of reverence, awe, and humility toward our students, and with respect, too, for the enormous, transformative power of good teaching.

To teach is to choose a life of challenge.

Another challenge is to look deeply into the contexts within which teaching occurs—social surround, historical flow, cultural web. While the unexamined teaching life is hardly worth living, the examined life will include pain and difficulty—after all, the contexts of our lives include unearned privileges and underserved suffering, murderous drugs and deadening work, a howling sense of hopelessness for some and the palpable threat of annihilation for others. To be aware of the social and moral universe we inhabit and share, and to be aware, too, of what has yet to be achieved in terms of human possibility, is to be a teacher capable of hope and struggle, outrage and action.

But of course the teacher can only create a context, set a stage, open a curtain. The teacher's task is excruciatingly complex precisely because it is idiosyncratic and improvisational—as inexact as a person's mind or a human heart, as unique and inventive as a friendship or a love affair. The teacher's work is all about background, environment, setting, surrounding, position, situation, connection. And relationship. Teaching is tougher than learning because teaching requires the teacher to let

thers learn. Learning requires action, choice, and assent om the student. But teaching is always undertaken ithout guarantees. Teaching is an act of faith.

Another basic challenge for teachers is to create an nvironment that will challenge and nurture the wide ange of students who will actually appear in your class-ooms. There need to be multiple entry points toward earning and a range of routes to success. The teacher uilds the context—her or his ideas, preferences, values, nstincts, and experiences are worked up in the learn-ng environment. It is essential to reflect about what you alue, your expectations and standards—remember, the dimensions you are working with are not just feet and inches but also hopes and dreams. Think about what one senses walking through the door—What is the atmo-sphere? What quality of experience is anticipated? What technique is dominant? What voice will be apparent?

The intellectual work of teachers—to see students as people with hopes, dreams, aspirations, skills, and capac-ities; with bodies and minds and hearts and spirits; with experiences, histories, a past, a pathway, a future; embed-ded in families, neighborhoods, cultural surrounds, and language communities—is knotty and complicated, and it requires patience, curiosity, wonder, humility. It demands sustained focus, intelligent judgment, inquiry and investigation. It requires wide-awakeness, since every judgment is contingent, every view partial, every conclusion tentative. The student is dynamic, alive, in motion. Nothing is settled, once and for all. No summary can be entirely authoritative. The student grows and changes—yesterday's need is forgotten, today's claims are all-encompassing and brand new. This, then, is an intellectual task of serious, massive proportion.

It also involves an ethical stance, an implied moral con-tract. The good teacher offers unblinking attention, even awe, and communicates a deep regard for students' lives, a respect for vulnerability. An engaged teacher begins with a belief that each student is unique, each worthy of a certain reverence. Regard extends, importantly, to an insistence that students have access to the tools with which to nego-tiate and perhaps even to transform the world. Love for students just as they are—without any drive or advance toward a future—is false love, enervating and disabling. The teacher must try, in good faith, to do no harm, and convince students to reach out, to reinvent, to seize an education fit for the fullest lives they might hope for.

Further, if we are to discover and develop our own relationship to the good and the just, we must under-stand our lives and our work as a journey or a quest. If we are to become more than clerks or robots or function-aries we must be reaching for the good, trying to repair the harm. We must see ourselves, then, as seekers, stu-dents, aspirants.

We teachers, then, need to see ourselves as in transi-tion, in motion, works in progress. We become students of our students, in part to understand them, in part to know ourselves. A powerful reason to teach has always been to learn ourselves. Paulo Freire (1985) describes this beau-tifully: "Through dialogue the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student and students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teachers, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow" (p. 67).

In a democracy there must be discussion, deliberation, dialogue. And while in every dialogue there are mistakes, misperceptions, struggle, and emotion, it is the disequilibrium of dialogue that leads to exploration, discovery, and change. Dialogue is improvisational and unrehearsed, and is undertaken with the serious inten-tion of engaging others. This means we speak with the possibility of being heard, and listen with the possibility of being changed. Our conviction, then, is tempered with agnosticism and a sense of the contingent. We commit to questioning, exploring, inquiring, paying attention, going deeper. But it is not enough to put ourselves forward and assert our perspective; we must also allow for the possi-bility of being ourselves transformed. All of this is based on an unshakable faith in human beings. If we already know everything, we are terrible students and bad teach-ers. All knowledge is contingent, all inquiry limited, no perspective every perspective. To some this is cause for despair, but for teachers it might provoke some sense of trembling excitement.

With eyes wide open and riveted on learners, a fur-ther challenge to honest and righteous teachers is to stay wide-awake to the world, to the concentric circles con-text in which we live and work. Teachers must know and care about some aspect of our shared life—our calling after all, is to shepherd and enable the callings of oth-ers. Teachers, then, invite students to become somehow more capable, more thoughtful and powerful in their choices, more engaged in a culture and civilization, able to participate, to embrace, and, yes, to change all that is before them. How do we warrant that invitation? How do we understand this society, this culture?

Teachers must always choose—they must choose how to see the students before them, and how to see the world as well, what to embrace and what to reject, whether to support or resist this or that directive. In schools where the insistent illusion that everything has already been set-tled is heavily promoted, teachers experience a constricted sense of choice, diminished imaginative space, a feeling of powerlessness regarding the basic questions of teaching and the larger purposes of education. But in these places, too, teachers must find ways to resist, to choose for the children, for the future. It is only as teachers choose that the ethical emerges. James Baldwin (1988) says:

> The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to

> look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish. The obligation of anyone who thinks of himself as responsible is to examine society and try to change it and to fight it—at no matter what risk. This is the only hope society has. This is the only way societies change.

We assume, then, a deep capacity in students, an intelligence (sometimes obscure, sometimes buried) as well as a wide range of hopes, dreams, and aspirations; we acknowledge, as well, obstacles to understand and overcome, deficiencies to repair, injustices to correct. With this as a base, the teacher may create an environment with abundant opportunities to practice freedom and to embody justice; to display, foster, expect, demand, nurture, allow, model, and enact inquiry toward moral action. A classroom organized in this way follows a particular rhythm: Questions focus on issues or problems (What do we need or want to know? Why is it important? How will we find out?) and on action (Given what we know now, what are we going to do about it?).

Hannah Arendt reminds us that education is where we determine whether we love the world enough to take full responsibility for it, and simultaneously whether we love our children enough to provide them entry into a given world, as well as the tools to re-energize and transform it.

Education, clearly, is political in the best sense. Schools are necessarily a conversation unfinished.

In a time when the universe of social discourse is receding and disappearing, teachers need to wonder how to continue to speak the unhearable. How can the unspoken be heard? How does self-censorship perpetuate the silence? The tension between aspiration and possibility is acute, and the question of what is to be done a daily challenge.

It is important in our work that we tell no lies and claim no easy victories. There is no easy solution, no one right way to mobilize for a better way. We must remain skeptics and agnostics, even as we stir ourselves to act on behalf of what the known demands of us. We can, then, resist becoming credulous in the face of official, authoritative knowledge, and resist as well the debilitating tendency toward cynicism about the possibility of people to act and change their lives.

Learning to teach takes time, energy, hard work. Learning to teach well requires even more: a serious and sustained engagement with the enterprise, an intense focus on the lives of children, a passionate regard for the future—that is, for the community our students will inherit and reinvent—and for the world they are arching toward.

Becoming a wonderful teacher, or a great or awesome teacher, is a lifetime affair. This is because good teaching is forever pursuing better teaching; it is always dynamic and in motion, always growing, learning, developing, searching for a better way. Teaching is never finished, never still, never easily summed up. "Wonderful Teacher" might be inscribed on someone's lifetime achievement award, printed on a retirement party banner, or etched on a tombstone, but it is never right for a working teacher. As long as I live I am under construction, becoming a teacher, learning to teach, practicing the art and craft of teaching. I'm still trying to achieve wonderfulness. Good teachers, their, are what they are not yet, and so their first and firmest rule is to reach.

Anything worth knowing or doing is a bit like this. Building friendships or a marriage or a love affair, reading novels or poems, having sex and raising children—in each of these we start off clumsy and inexperienced; with practice and reflection we can grow into wiser and more graceful participants; and as good as we might get, growth and development are still possible. Understanding life—and teaching—as infinite quest and adventure can be welcome and even heartening news. It nudges teachers to develop open and curious dispositions of mind, receptive and forgiving hearts, a stance of authentic engagement.

Teaching as an ethical enterprise goes beyond presenting what already is; it is teaching toward what ought to be. It is walking with the mothers of children, carrying the sound of the sea, exploring the outer dimensions of love. It is more than moral structures and guidelines; it includes an exposure to and understanding of material realities—advantages and disadvantages, privileges and oppressions—as well. Teaching of this kind might stir people to come together as vivid, thoughtful, and sometimes outraged. Students and teachers, then, might find themselves dissatisfied with what, only yesterday, had seemed the natural order of things. At this point, when consciousness links to conduct and upheaval is in the air, teaching becomes a call to freedom.

The fundamental message of the teacher is this: You must change your life. Whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever you've done, the teacher invites you to a second chance, another round, perhaps a different conclusion. The teacher posits possibility, openness, and alternative; the teacher points to what could be, but is not yet. The teacher beckons you to change your path.

To teach consciously for justice and ethical action is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity and the life chances of others, to their freedom, and then to drive and to move against those obstacles. And so the fundamental message of the teacher for ethical action is: You can change the world.

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