The Elements of Teaching

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and Harold C. Cannon

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Preface

THIS BOOK is about teaching. And because it is about teaching, much of it is devoted to the personal qualities of good teachers.

Believing that teaching is an art, we have emphasized the artists who practice it. This does not mean that we are unmindful of the science of teaching; as with every other art, mastery of teaching is gained through close attention to methods and materials as well as to refinement of native gifts. Yet we have focused on the qualities, both natural and cultivated, of those who teach rather than on the techniques they use because far too much attention has been given to explaining the process of teaching and not nearly enough to describing the people responsible for that process. Those people cannot be separated from what they do. The human factor in teaching is infinitely variable and beyond the reach of scientific inquiry. It is that factor, rather than the professional one, that is the subject of this book.

We have written it for those who teach and for those who wish to consider what makes up the art of teaching and learn to recognize its achievement. Who, specifically, do we have in mind as our readers?

Those who are considering teaching as a career or just beginning to teach, who need to know both the demands of their chosen work and the deep satisfactions of its pursuit and mastery.

- Veteran teachers, practiced in their ways and classroom characters, who may need reassurance about the value, indeed sometimes the glory, of their efforts, and who may also seek the inspiration and encouragement to evaluate their old habits and to consider new ones.

- Those many people—parents, students, administrators, members of governing boards, and public officials—who evaluate teaching for personal or professional reasons.

- And those many others who, with no less seriousness of intent or moral concern than professional teachers, occasionally instruct other people in unfamiliar tasks—parents, police officers, managers, counselors, coaches, and all professionals—in fact, anyone and everyone.

The book originates in our personal experiences. It represents the distillation of two lifetimes of teaching in many settings, from an elementary school classroom in the slums of southeast London to graduate seminars in an Ivy League university. Yet it is in no sense a memoir; it contains no references to personal history. It is instead, as Gilbert Highet characterized his own penetrating *Art of Teaching,* "a book of suggestions drawn from practice."

Because the book is intended to highlight the qualities that make up great teaching, we have thought it useful to illustrate the form and shape which these qualities may take in classrooms with the portraits of teachers—good and bad, exemplary and cautionary—at work. While the characters are fictional, they are by no means figments of our fancy; we have drawn their

traits and tactics from teachers we have known and from our own experiences. We wish the sketches to demonstrate teaching in progress—a living process full of teachers' faults, foibles, mistakes, quirks, fancies, and blemishes as well as their virtues and triumphs. No single person to our knowledge has ever possessed all the virtues or vices we portray, but all these attributes of teachers have existed somewhere, sometime. By illustrating with concrete examples the general elements of which we have written, we hope to help make somewhat abstract qualities come to life.

Every idea in this book rests on our conviction that, for those who pursue it seriously, teaching is a calling, a summons from within; that it is among life's noblest and most responsible activities—an activity in which we have all engaged at one time or another as parents, workers, and friends; and that those who teach with fullness of heart and complete engagement are entitled to every honor and support that their communities can extend. Thus we hope to find as readers those who wish to understand, as we have tried to understand, good teaching wherever and however it occurs. We have written for all, like ourselves, who would gladly learn that gladly they might (better) teach.

The book has been greatly improved by the engaged readings and wise reflections of those who have exercised their critical powers on earlier versions of the manuscript: Olivia P. Banner, Christine R. Beacham, Paul L. Brannan, Betty M. Cannon, Edwin J. Delattre, A. Graham Down, Richard Ekman, Barbara C. Follansbee, Alan Fraker, Dennis Gray, Norman Hirschfeld, Phyllis Hirschkop, Marvin Hirshfeld, Gwin J. Kolb,

Bryce V. Lambert, Jacob Neusner, Roger Rosenblatt, Robert A. Scott, Eileen Sheehy, and Jane Zacek—teachers all! Mark Carroll and Dana J. Pratt provided sage advice and comforting assurance about the publication of the work. At Yale University Press, Dan Heaton's editorial gifts greatly sharpened the text, and Charles Grench warmly encouraged and skillfully supported our work. While relieving them all of responsibility for any errors that may remain and for all arguments with which they may still disagree, we are nevertheless deeply grateful for their assistance and counsel.

The Elements of Teaching

Introduction

MOST TEACHERS forget that teaching is an art.

Trained in the sciences and techniques of education, professional teachers are conscientious in applying the psychology and methods that they have learned. They may not call what they are trying to do "teaching" and may prefer instead such terms as *explanation, instruction, demonstration, guidance,* or simply *setting a good example.* Yet even those who have enjoyed first-class professional preparation, when summoned to instruct, guide, and inform those entrusted to them, are faced with one of the greatest, because earliest, challenges of teaching: they must improvise as best they can. And they rarely get it right the first time. Only after much repetition, some nervous invention, occasional losses of temper, and general frustration, do their own processes of learning lurch forward. Then they lick their wounds, and, perhaps wondering why they were ever willing to try to teach anyone anything in the first place, they gradually perfect their art. Some teachers, whether professional or amateur, may never manage to get it right; some may fail to teach anyone anything important at all. Even those many of us who teach more or less effectively are often overwhelmed by justifiable concern for our lesson plans and their implementation, by getting our students through our courses, and by negotiating the politics and administrative obligations that seem inherent in any calling as burdened with responsibilities as

teaching. Consequently, we often simply fail to give sustained and collegial thought to teaching's broader components.

This may be because we prepare for our calling by learning the subjects we will teach and the methods by which we will teach them. And there is nothing wrong with that. Yet rarely, if ever, are we led to reflect on those dimensions of character and mind that are at the very core of what we do—which is to help others acquire both the knowledge by which they can understand life in all its fullness and the dispositions by which they can live such a life. These dimensions of our own selves constitute the core of our teaching; when we teach, we animate inert knowledge with qualities of our own personality and spirit that affect, or ought to affect, our students. Nevertheless, though these qualities differ from subjects and techniques, we rarely consider these aspects of our selves separately; rarely do we take them to be distinct from the hows and whats of instruction, which, extrinsic to ourselves and usually taught to us as we prepare to teach others, do not arise from within.

The basic elements of teaching, by contrast, are qualities that come to inhere in us, even if we do not recognize them as such or fully develop them. Rarely can they be taught. They are ingredients of our own humanity, to which contents and methods are adjunct. We must draw them from ourselves, identify, develop, and then apply them. We may know our subjects and perfect our techniques for teaching them without recognizing that, for our mastery to make a difference to our students, we must also summon from within certain qualities of personality that have little to do with subject matter or theories of instruc-

tion. We don't learn these qualities, we call them forth—and, by understanding them, we use them for the benefit of others.

While pedagogical expertise and technical knowledge are essential to it ultimately teaching is a creative act; it makes something fresh from existing knowledge in spontaneous, improvised efforts of mind and spirit, disciplined by education and experience. Thus, unlike a technology, in which correct application produces predictable and uniform results, teaching yields infinite surprises—infinite delights—from one moment to the next. What method can supply to teaching we know or can learn; what art can furnish out of our own selves we must imagine—and then practice.

So while we cannot predict the outcome of teaching from its ingredients, we can isolate these ingredients, much as we can those of any art, in order to examine and understand them. What ground, medium, color, form, and implements are to the visual arts, so certain constituents—learning, authority, ethics, order, imagination, compassion, patience, character, and pleasure—are to teaching. Just as all artists learn, know, select, and employ varieties of each of the constituent elements of their craft in creating their distinct works, so teachers use the components of their own art to teach in ways as distinctive as each teacher is unique. For this reason, teaching has always defied strict and agreed-upon definition. We think we know great teaching when we encounter it, yet we find it impossible to say precisely what has gone into making it great.

We generally suppose that great artists are aware of what they are doing, of how the materials they use create the effect

they strive to achieve. We imagine that they are calling forth qualities in themselves to fashion something that has never been seen or heard before. Similarly, all teachers draw upon what they are and what they know when they try to advance the knowledge of their students. While teaching shares some of the attributes of science—its necessary components can be identified, some of its good results can be repeated, discoveries about it can be built upon—it is intrinsically an imaginative synthesis. It is the making of something new out of barely organized components. Its aim, especially with young students, is to fill and enlarge the character and spirit, as well as the mind, of others. And like every art, it is composed of acts of faith—endeavors of hope that our efforts to extend knowledge in others will somehow "take" with them.

Teachers differ from artists, however, in that they are rarely invited, as they pursue their calling, to think about what they are and what they know of themselves, although some of them eventually find ways to do so. For most teachers, consideration of the elements that make up their daily work—the ingredients out of which they compose their art—forms part neither of their professional preparation nor of their subsequent continuing education. And teachers at all levels spend very little professional time discussing these matters with colleagues.

This is a serious loss to teachers and, more critically, to their students. For if teachers are trustees of their students' welfare, they must consider not just why they are teaching and how, but also with what. That is to say, they must know what their acts exemplify, what qualities of life and character they themselves embody, as they try to convey knowledge to others.