

ON OUR WORK OF TEACHING

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May the favor of the Lord, our God, be upon us; let the work of our hands prosper, O prosper the work of our hands! – Psalm 90:17 (Jewish Publication Society of America)

Upon graduating from the University of Berlin, where, according to his biographer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's studies with Adolf von Harnack, Karl Holl, and Reinhold Seeberg, among others, "equipped [him] with the armor for his theology," Bonhoeffer expressed gratitude to his teachers by writing some phrases of farewell to them on his thesis. He wrote this to Professor Harnack: "What I have learned and come to understand in your seminar is too closely associated with my whole personality for me to be able ever to forget it."¹

Two years later, during the summer of 1929, the young Bonhoeffer and some of his friends attended a farewell event honoring the eighty-seven-year-old Harnack. In his tribute to Harnack on that occasion, Bonhoeffer said: "That you were our teacher for many hours was a passing thing; that we can call ourselves your pupils remains."²

Those stirring tributes were to one who honorably bore the teacher's yoke. Perhaps you have come across similarly stirring tributes to teachers in the course of your wide reading. For those of us entrusted with the blessed privilege to teach, such tributes keep us mindful that a crown of trust has been placed above our heads and we must continually grow taller if we are ever to reach it.

Teaching is indeed a privileged work. It is a fundamental activity that is filled with promise. Jacques Barzun's timely and strategic reminder that the task of teaching is to turn pupils into life-long learners, aiding them to be creative and produc-

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tive persons, highlights aspects of that promise.³ This process of assisting pupils to become independent learners is usually prolonged and sometimes painful. It means interacting with students who alternate in their attitudes toward us: receiving from us for awhile, then standing in rejection, usually trusting us and often testing us, curious and eager to know most of the time but sometimes hampered by resentment toward the demands placed upon them in the process to discover and understand, recall matters and relate them for meaning. Near the end of his long and illustrious teaching career, William James was probably recalling how this sometimes distressing process had weighed upon him when he rejoiced that he would no longer have to face a "mass of alien and recalcitrant humanity."⁴ Teaching is a difficult task, but the difficulties are because of the promise associated with it, the promise of benefit, life-changing benefit, to persons.

Good teaching involves far more than the sharing of facts and the concern to stimulate inquiry; it also involves an understanding of students as persons, and the need to honor their human worth. As you well know, the task of teaching does include that wide range of activities such as reading, research, reflection, consultation with one's colleagues, modeling virtues and skills, promoting values, mapping the process and monitoring the progress of students in relation to a course and a curriculum, but central to our work is the spirit in which we serve. Along with the benefits that our learning and scholarly process equip us to share with them, students need our human touch. Gilbert Highet had this in mind when he advised that to teach well, "You must throw your heart into it, and must realize that it cannot all be done by formulas, or you will spoil your work, and your pupils, and yourself."⁵

II

In 1897 a book entitled *Men I Have Known* was published. It was written by clergyman Frederick W. Farrar, and in it he reminisced about eminent persons he had known. Poet Robert Browning was one of them, and Farrar quoted Browning's comment to him about how important it is that young people have the memory of "seeing great men." I thought of that comment while preparing this message to you, because there is in my memory of my grade school years a great and unforgettable teacher, an African-American man who threw his heart into the task of teaching me. He was competent, industrious, and caring. His classroom was a virtual picture gallery, with glossy photographs lining the space between the ceiling and the blackboard along three of the classroom walls. I shall never forget the drama we children sensed as he supplemented the class lessons with information about the persons whose pictures hung on the classroom walls. And along with the stories he shared about each pictured person, there was also an increased and justifiable sense of pride in our race—because the pictures on the walls were of African Americans who were grand achievers, persons who, despite great odds, had become great. That teacher knew what we would face growing up in America, and he addressed that need. But, knowing our need to wed strict guidance to the pride and hope deepening in us, that teacher cautioned us with some lines from Longfellow's "The Ladder of Saint Augustine":

The heights by great men reached and kept
 Were not attained by sudden flight;
 But they, while their companions slept,
 Were toiling upward in the night.

Those lines, which I first heard during my grade school years at Ulysses S. Grant School in Ferndale, Mich., still stir my spirit and prod me to be diligent in every quest and endeavor. The teacher who recited those lines to us exemplified in his character, competence, and caring the message they bear. No one should wonder, then, why teaching came to stand out in my mind as the noblest of work.

A few years ago, I joined with other friends, family members, and former students to attend that teacher's funeral service in Detroit. He and I had remained close across the years, sharing letters, telephone calls, and visits from time to time. He died in his 93rd year of life, and we had conversed by phone during the month before his death. His last letter to me has been placed among my treasures: he sent with it a list of former students with whom he was still in contact, and beside each name was a brief description of what that person was doing. His letter to me also included a gift photograph of himself as he was at the time he taught me in grade school! Those mementos hold deep meaning for me, and they keep me reminded that the central issue in both teaching and living is to touch other lives in meaningful ways. Good teaching happens when this remains a central concern. The teaching of Mr. Coit Cook Ford, Sr. issued from his heart; his work gave me inspiration, a good human influence, and essential information. Good teaching includes these three benefits, but the greatest of them is a good human influence. This is the kind of teaching that deserves tribute, the kind of teaching that God blesses to make it prosper.

III

Most of you are familiar with clergyman John Henry Newman's classic study, *Idea of a University*, and will recall that in the preface to his book, while offering his definition of a university, Newman explained it as being "a place of teaching universal knowledge."⁶ Newman emphasized teaching as a central function in a university setting.

Several aspects of Newman's full definition of a university are still being debated, while some aspects of it are being refined—as many of you know who are familiar with Jaroslav Pelikan's recent reassessment of Newman's classic.⁷ But Newman's emphasis on teaching as a central function in the university is worthy of being underscored anew. Teaching is crucial not only to university life, it is imperative for transmitting and preserving a clear understanding of life itself. It is not incidental that the great leaders in history, religious leaders included, have been teachers.

IV

I began these words with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's tribute to Adolf von Hamack, one of his honored teachers. As I conclude them I must mention something else Bonhoeffer wrote about his teachers.

Writing from Tegel Prison to his parents on Reformation Day, 1943, seven months into

his confinement there because of his political resistance against Hitler, Bonhoeffer was still aware of the rhythm of the church year and shared with them some of his meditation about the meaning of that day. He also shared his wonderment about why Martin Luther's actions and teachings had been followed by consequences which were the exact opposite of what he had intended.⁸ Luther had worked for unity between Christian people, but both the church and Europe had been torn apart. He had worked for the "freedom of the Christian believer," but the unexpected consequence was licentiousness among the masses. Luther had worked to bring about a secular order freed from clerical privilege and control, but the result was insurrection, the Peasant's War, and general disorder in society. Luther was so affected by the tum of events that his last years of life were tormented; again and again he doubted the value of his life's work. Bonhoeffer thought about all this on that Reformation Day, and he recalled a classroom discussion in Berlin when Karl Holl and Adolf von Hamack debated whether the great historical intellectual and spiritual movements made headway through their primary or their secondary motives. Holl had argued that such movements went forward due to their primary motives, while Hamack countered that the secondary motives moved them forward. While first hearing them debate, Bonhoeffer had thought Holl to be right and Hamack wrong. But later, in prison, reflecting on what had happened to Germany under Hitler, and on his own situation as a political prisoner, Bonhoeffer turned more to the view that Hamack was right.

All teaching, even in the best of settings and in the interest of the best of students, involves us in the circle of circumstance, and our approach to our task must be tempered by an understanding that much of what we formulate and treat in teaching is not fixed and final truth, but pointers to the truth. There must also be the awareness that much of what we do will bear consequences we did not intend to effect. Some of what we teach out of a primary motive will fall short of our intended purpose because of circumstance, and some secondary effect will become prominent. This conditional factor should keep us reminded that what we *are* is as crucial in teaching as what we know and *do*. This circumstantial factor to our work should also keep us sensitive to our need for help from beyond ourselves as we teach.

V

So as we return to our work, let us continue our scholarly pursuits to stay fresh for our task, remaining eager, as well, to assist the learning process of those who look to us. Let us have a framework that encases what we do, and a focus to what we do. Let us believingly trust that there is a future in what we do. The text gives us assurance for such trust. It is a prayer-plea, credited to Moses, who sought the favor of God's wisdom and the guarantee of God's will as he, Israel's teaching leader, did his work.

Like Moses, let us anchor our dreams in prayer and bolster our deeds by a daring trust. Let us give ourselves to study, thought, planning, discipline, prayer, tears, sweat, and persistent work, doing what is ours to do, but trusting God to bless it all to the highest good. All of this must have been in the heart of Moses as he prayed:

May the favor of the Lord, our God, be upon us;
let the work of our hands prosper.
O prosper the work of our hands!

NOTES

1. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 46. English trans. by Eric Mosbacher et al., Edwin Robertson, ed.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
3. See Jacques Barzun, *Teacher in America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1959), esp. pp. 17-31.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
5. *The Art of Teaching* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), p. viii.
6. John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University: Defined and Illustrated*, Ian T. Ker, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), see the preface.
7. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), chps. 8-9, pp. 78-98.
8. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Eberhard Bethge, ed. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1972), p. 123.

