

## WHEN THE TEACHER'S WRONG

Once when Socrates finished a lesson, Plato and the other kids took out their cigarette lighters and waved them overhead in unison. What?! There were no lighters four hundred years before Jesus, you say. Well, perhaps not, nor were there any cigarettes. The fact is that good as Socrates was, he wasn't Mr. Chips or Yoda every day. Indeed there was the time when Plato himself complained, "Master, you're killing us." To which Socrates sharply replied, "Then you'll die educated, Grasshopper." And he did.

Almost everyone has a bad-teacher story to tell. I've sat before well over a hundred teachers and professors in my day, and so has most everyone else with a college diploma. Why then are we surprised by the few bad apples in the vast barrel of golden delicious? Still the variety of diseases that infect the harvest is astonishing: The first-grade teacher who smells something foul and orders the young fellow she suspects to drop his pants before the entire class. The alien physics teacher on *Third Rock from the Sun* who announces that he is here "to attach the electrodes of learning to the nipples of ignorance." The seventh-grade physical-education teacher who shows films of his old college basketball games every time it threatens to rain. The Sunday-school teacher who boasts, "I just show up and let the Lord work through me." The Advanced Placement history teacher who reads from the textbook in his 8AM class and plays a tape of his reading for the four classes which follow. The high-school English teacher who has her students memorize and recite *The Gettysburg Address* as she has personally rewritten it. The college English professor who passes wind, belches, and calls the women in class *broads* without apology. The English instructor who turns a sophomore survey of contemporary American literature into an all-Steven-King "seminar." The Romantics professor who gives only multiple-choice examinations because he doesn't want to "waste my eyesight on student essays." The French professor who crams five and a half weeks of summer work into three, so he can take advantage of a time-share in Provence. The professor of Victorian literature who falls asleep himself reading *Sartor Resartus* from the podium. The English professor who plays recordings of Shakespeare to his undergraduates and the same tape (except in stereo) to his graduate students. The English professor who announces on the first day of his seminar that "this is a course with four thousand facts about Spenser—learn them all and you will earn an A." The organic chemistry professor who announces in the first class, "I believe in a bell-curve distribution; therefore, if 10% of you make A's, 10% must fail." Another professor of Shakespeare who orders his class to "discuss Hamlet as Shakespeare's greatest play, and if you don't agree, to what defect in yourself do you attribute this?" And finally, there is the community-college teacher who is teaching five writing classes on-line from her home. When asked what program she uses for line editing, she replies, "Oh, I just add a terminal comment like, 'Your spelling needs improvement,' or, 'too many comma faults.'"

More interesting in my opinion is the teacher who is factually wrong. Many students recall a time when they were right and the teacher wasn't. They may not have realized it at the time, but once the truth dawns, it is seldom forgotten. My wife is reminded of such a time whenever she comes upon "vagabond." She grew up in Germany and had English classes from the fifth grade until she graduated from *Mittelschule*. One day standing before her classmates in the tenth grade and reading a passage from *Lucky Jim*, she was corrected by Herr Brinkmann when she "stumbled" on "vagabond." Her teacher, who had never

crossed the English Channel or seen a Rex Harrison movie, snickered self-righteously and said that the word is pronounced “vagabound.” Since she was ridiculed publicly, the “correct” pronunciation was engraved on the steel plate of her memory. (Perhaps Herr Brinkmann was thinking of the Middle English “vagabound,” but I doubt it. Incidentally, some Englishmen do say “vagabuhnd,” today but never “vagabound.”) Years later when my wife came to the States, she noticed that people responded with an amused, quizzical look every time she used the word, so she asked me, her husband, how to pronounce the word, and I set her straight with the Shorter Oxford—though I hated to run that charming “vagabound” out of the gypsy camp of her vocabulary. Though I haven’t heard her mispronounce the word in thirty years, she still hesitates briefly before speaking it. Such is the lasting insecurity caused by pedagogical misinformation.

A friend of mine tells a similar story about her daughter’s third-grade teacher. This tale, however, comes with a tart twist of lemon. The class had just finished a unit on the weather which Amanda, my friend’s daughter, felt quite confident about since her father was an atmospheric physicist, and he had been informally “teaching” her meteorology since she was old enough to talk. On a class field trip, she distinguished a cumulus from an altostratus for her teacher who thought those “fluffy things up there” were just clouds. After the unit test, however, Amanda brought home a “B” with a long face besides.

“But you knew the material cold last night—what happened?” her father asked.

“I missed number seven, and Mrs. Lovingood took off ten points,” his daughter said handing her father the crumpled test paper.

“Let’s see—number seven asks, ‘What happens when a cold front meets a warm front?’ And you answered, ‘It rains.’ I don’t understand,” her father said patting her on the head; “your answer is correct. Perhaps I’d better go see your teacher; I don’t think this can be handled over the phone.” The next day he called the school, made an appointment, and showed up ready to defend his daughter’s answer.

“Dr. Pinckney, it’s so nice to see you again,” said Mrs. Lovingood, an African-American woman with a great pudding of a bosom. “I can’t imagine that Amanda is having trouble,” she said as the professor squeezed his six-foot frame into a tiny desk; “she’s such a sweet and serious student.” The distinguished professor of physics explained why he had come, and the third-grade teacher of general science said she wished that more parents were as involved with their children’s education as Dr. Pinckney and his wife. The test, she explained, had been designed by the state which meant that there was a state key. “Let’s see now, that was number seven on the weather-unit test, wasn’t it? Here it is—‘precipitation’; that’s the answer on the key, and that’s the word I drilled the class on. Not little old ‘rain.’ I even wrote it on the chalkboard.” The professor was in a deep bind now because he knew that “precipitation” was a better answer than “rain” since the former included sleet, snow, and rain not to mention sneet and a host of other recent neologisms. He wondered aloud if some partial credit might be awarded, but he felt like a hypocrite since in his own classes he was a stickler for precise terminology. Unfolding himself from the desk, he made up something about a dentist’s appointment, tucked his tail between his legs, and left. Of course, the teacher at fault here was the professor, and neither Amanda nor her parents ever hear the word “precipitation” without thinking of the father’s embarrassment.

Timothy Stanley, another friend who is a professor, tells the bitter story of being taught “white superiority” in a West Texas grammar school. He also recalls the flash of

atomic explosions coming from White Sands Proving Grounds, but that's another story. As a boy in the 1950s, the professor was bussed to school past Hispanic and Negro children walking to a school across town. Some passed through the shadow of Tim's white school carrying tattered earlier editions of the same books he was studying. He didn't give the matter much thought in the 50s because one of his teachers had explained the "natural inferiority of the darker races," and no one he knew questioned the arrangement. Furthermore, Tim's father was off fighting the "yellow" Japanese at the time, and by 1945, the boy had developed a strong dislike of anything Asian. To this day, he cannot pull up behind a Mitsubishi pick-up at a stop light without wanting to "squeeze off a few rounds" into the tailgate. His father, who survived the war by shooting down half a dozen Zeroes built by Mitsubishi, was a tail gunner in the B-24. After the war, Hollywood and his father's stories of Japanese atrocities placed a permanent barrier between him and the Orient. Fortunately, however, reading Rousseau in graduate school convinced him that at least some "savages" could be "noble."

In fact, my friend is not too different from the thousands of German school children in the 1930s who were taught using a state-approved curriculum that Jews were "vermin" and thus deserving of the Nazi's "rat trap." Had those atomic tests that my friend saw distant flashes of in West Texas failed, or if the Germans had developed nuclear weapons before the Americans did, it's very likely that many classrooms today throughout Europe and North America would be openly teaching racial hatred. Though by the twenty-first century, there might not be many dark-skinned people left to hate.

Even though I opened by stating that most everyone has been mistaught at one time, I can honestly say that except for a choral director whom I will mention shortly, it never happened to me. Sure, some of the information I picked up in my history, geography, and English courses is now wrong or dated, but that's why Britannica, Americana, and other reference tools are updated regularly. The best I can do to get personally involved in this essay is to tell a few stories about myself: the first about me as a father, the second about me as a teacher.

When our son, who'd fallen into the middle-school slump, was registering for the ninth grade, I encouraged him to take wood shop instead of a study hall or some other "easy" elective. I had images of us sitting at a work bench cutting dovetails for a grandchild's cradle. I had loved my shop class at PS 201 in Brooklyn and have kept my hand in woodworking in some small degree ever since I made my father a longhorn tie rack with a spoke shave and a band saw. Despite (or perhaps "because of") the flame-red nostrils and glass-bead eyes, my father never mounted the rack in his closet, but I was not discouraged, and if we had not moved to Georgia at the end of the year, I would have taken Wood Shop II. Anyway six months later after considerable prying, our son revealed that he was going to make a bar stool as his final shop project. Four waist-high legs were to be turned from solid cherry, and the seat, also cherry, would be hollowed by hand to fit his bottom. We already had a full complement of stools around our kitchen bar, but, I said, we could always use a fifth for the occasional guest, so I urged him to deliver us a stool the way that fully-armed Athena sprang from Zeus's forehead. Perhaps I aimed too high.

At term's end, our son came home with his stool in a large plastic shopping bag. As he placed the construct on the tile floor in the kitchen, I noticed that it wobbled even when it was moved to the carpet of the dining room. My disappointment only increased when he pulled off the plastic with mock fanfare as if he were unveiling the lost, bronze *David*

by Michelangelo. I was speechless, but my wife filled in seamlessly as I bit my tongue. Not only were the stool's legs uneven, the four horizontal struts rose and fell like a stock-market graph. But worst of all, wood glue had run out of most joints and down the legs where it had dried like snot on a neglected baby's lip.

Finally I spoke: "What did the teacher give you on this?"

"An 'A,'" our son said in the clipped monotone of jaded adolescence.

"Congratulations," I said and retired to the garage to clean the lawnmower's air filter, which I confess did not really need cleaning. The next day without telling our son, I called the school and spoke with his shop teacher. "If what our son brought home is an example of 'A' work," I asked, "what does an 'F' look like?"

"I don't give 'F's', sir. Adolescent egos are far too fragile. I try to encourage them, not stifle them. Don't you recall your first woodworking project?"

"Yes," I said, "it was a bedside lamp in the form of an old-fashioned hand pump. To turn the lamp on or off, you pumped the handle, which had a beaded chain from the socket attached." I hesitated as I launch into the rehearsed portion of my speech. "If I remember correctly, I received a 'C' for my efforts even though I had wiped glue from every joint. That grade was both a reward and an incentive. I knew my pump was not plumb just as my son knows his stool is a lost labor, and neither is he fooled nor consoled by your evaluation. I suppose he appreciates what the 'A' does for his grade-point average, but I haven't noticed any passion for woodworking during the past year. I can promise you that I will not be sending you any more of our offspring."

Indeed, our son has not undertaken a woodworking project since the ninth grade unless you count a few meandering shelves supported by an aluminum frame screwed to his garage wall. Despite the "A," he knew the stool was a personal indictment, and it wasn't because I or my wife told him. Today the cherry bar stool is a low garden stool. When our son married, he left his handiwork in the basement. With his permission, I solved the wobble with a rasp and file after I cut the legs down above the unsightly braces and sanded off the dried glue. It resides in the garden shed between my son and the dovetails he'll never cut. I suspect that it hurts him to look at its muddy feet, but he knows now it serves a practical end; I hope that's some consolation.

The last anecdote dates from my second or third year of teaching; I have over thirty-five now. In 1970, I had taught Frost's "The Road Not Taken" to college sophomores several times without a word of dissent. Indeed the class had laughed at my joke, "I took the road less traveled, and now I need my front-end aligned." I felt confident about what I was telling the class because in high school we had sung a choral version, and the choir director, an ex-Marine, had told us all about the spiritual rewards of choosing the hard path over the easy one, lifting yourself by the bootstraps, and coming up through the ranks. He said, "Imagine that you loved to collect guns and that your father owned a small grocery. Would you rather pursue your passion in guns, or work in the grocery knowing that one day it would be yours?" Of course at seventeen, we all said, "Guns!" not knowing a thing about the staggering odds against becoming a self-supporting arms merchant. Another reason that I felt confident about my interpretation of the poem is that there was a photograph of a leaf-strewn crossroad in the text we were using. One road was wide and inviting; the other was narrow and seemed to peter out in a briar patch. And furthermore, the answer to the question, "Which path in the photograph might Frost have chosen?" was

answered in the teacher's manual, "Probably the less traveled, less distinct path." "Probably" had worried me, but I overlooked it.

So after extolling the ascetic virtues of adversity, poverty, and the Peace Corps, I asked if there were any questions. An owl-eyed kid from New Jersey, who seldom spoke but weighed my every word in the balance of his brain, raised his hand and asked, "Why does Frost say in line ten that both those roads were worn 'really about the same'?" I stammered something, reread line ten aloud, and quoted Whitman's, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then...I contradict myself; I am large...I contain multitudes." I said that I would check into the apparent paradox, for clearly the last line says that one road was narrower than the other, "and that has made all the difference." Back in the office I read the poem closely for the first time and realized to my horror that Frost was not extolling the virtues of monastic choices. Instead, he is saying that when adults are asked by the young how they made a difficult decision, they often lie or exaggerate and say they deliberately chose the harder way, not that they flipped a mental coin which is how many, maybe most, tough personal decisions are made. I thought of my own choice as a freshman to change my major from business to English. I was sitting in the library after a stimulating discussion of *Waiting for Godot* and said to myself, "That's what I'd like to do with my life—read, write, and talk about books." So I went to the registrar's office, filled out a change-of-major form, and found two professors willing to sign it. The following day after a stimulating lecture on tax reform, I was ready to change my major back to business, but I didn't, for I was sure that Godot was an English major, and I wanted to be prepared when he arrived. To my credit, I think, I confessed my misreading of Frost to the class and said that I now understood how seven-foot-tall Wilt Chamberlain had felt the first time the shorter, smaller Bill Russell blocked one of his shots—astonished, humbled, and determined to put the ball in the hole the next time.

The former Governor of Texas John Connally once candidly confessed that in the 1920s when the shape of the earth was still an issue in the Bible Belt ("If angels trumpet from 'four corners of the earth,' it must be square.") Connally told a school board which was considering whether to hire him, "I can teach it round, or I can teach it flat." Well, I cannot. If I know the earth is an oblate spheroid, I will resign from teaching before I teach it flat or round. I refuse to be like the botanist who ripped out all the plants in a 100' x 100' plot that he could not identify before his taxonomy class assembled to practice their classification skills. And if a misidentification is called to my attention, I shall research the matter, admit my error if I have made one, and apologize. If this recurs with some regularity, I shall resign my post. It's one sure way of knowing when to retire.