

Thoughts for Teachers

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These thoughts are primarily meant for professional teachers. But probably they are relevant to all adults who in one way or another are teachers in life if not in the classroom. Then why should we exclude children who are in some way teachers? As C.P. Varkey has pointed out, “the role of the teacher in education will remain paramount. He or she alone can create the congenial climate for learning”.¹ Child psychologist Dr. Haim Gonott, who was once a teacher, agrees with C.P. Varkey. In his book, *Teacher and Child*, he declares: “I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humour, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.”²

Recently I came across a letter an anonymous student wrote to an unknown teacher. Most of my reflections here are related to what the student wrote in that letter.

1. The letter begins with a plea: “Try to be a human being, not just a teaching machine. Do not teach only the subject, but rather teach us students. Let me feel that you are inter-

ested in me as a human being, not just a number in your note-book”.

There are three important points in this plea. 1) A teacher is not meant to be a teaching machine but a real human being. He/she must be someone who is kind, compassionate, friendly, available and approachable. He/she must show real warmth in his/her interactions with students. 2) He/She has to adopt a personal approach in his/her teaching. Just as good doctors do not just deal with the illness of a patient but rather treat a patient who is ill, so a good teacher does not teach some subjects, but rather teaches students. He/she looks upon them as real human persons who have come to the school to learn. 3) A good teacher must be able to take real interest in students as human beings and sincerely try to communicate to them his/her interest.

2. Our anonymous student makes some concrete suggestions about the method of teaching: “Help me to think, to learn and to judge for myself, not just memorize ready-made answers. Help me rather to find the answers myself, even though this way may be more painful for me”.

Here the student is suggesting that in the process of education he/she should not be looked upon as a passive recipient of the teacher’s gift of knowledge, but as an active participant in the quest for knowledge. Many years ago Paulo Freire spoke of the ‘banking concept of education’ according to which the teacher ‘deposits’ knowledge in the minds of the students.³ What takes place is a mere transfer of knowledge. The students do not perform acts of cognition. Teaching must be a process of empowering students. They have to be helped to learn how to learn. The teacher has to create conditions in which students experience the

joy of search and the wonder of personal discovery. There is a Chinese proverb which says:

Tell me, I shall forget

Show me, I may remember

Involve me, I shall understand

3. The student now makes a request: “Do not expect of me what is beyond my talent or power”.

It is very important for a teacher to realize that his/her students are not equally gifted. Hence the teacher has to have a personalized approach to students. While it is necessary to challenge students to do their best, a teacher has to be patient and understanding towards weak students. An old teacher once remarked: I get my joy by teaching bright students; I earn my salary by teaching average students, and I win heaven by teaching dull students.

4. The student is aware of the need for some discipline: “Be strict with me provided that you are just. I know that I need it though outwardly I may rebel against it”.

I would like to make three comments on this suggestion of the student. 1. Some order is necessary in a classroom because it creates a climate of openness and discipline which makes teaching and learning easy. 2. Teachers should not unnecessarily curtail the freedom of students. For real learning takes place only in a relaxed atmosphere of freedom. 3. Most children are naturally good. If you have a sense of humour you can deal competently with the pranks of children. When a newly appointed teacher went to his class he saw on the blackboard written in bold letters: **Welcome to the Donkey**. The teacher read it and was a bit confused. Then he regained his composure and wrote

underneath: Mr. C. V. Jose. The children had a hearty laugh. That was the end of the whole affair.⁴

5. The student now makes an earnest request: “Listen seriously to the questions I may ask, however foolish they may sound to you”.

It is very important for the teacher to take every student and his/her questions seriously, He/she should not in any way ridicule a student whose questions may appear stupid. Every genuine question manifests the earnest quest of a young mind for clarity and certitude. Because of this the teacher should take his/her questions seriously and respond to them carefully.

6. Finally the student politely reminds the teacher that he has to be a constant learner: “Please keep studying yourself and do not mechanically use in the class the same yellow notes you wrote twenty years ago”.

We live in a world that is changing fast. In the world today there is an explosion of knowledge. In order to be a competent teacher in this time of change, a person has to be continuous learner. Some years back a group of German university students wrote: Today we are being taught by teachers of yesterday according to the knowledge and methods of day before yesterday for our life tomorrow”. I think that there is some truth in what these students are saying.

Recently a suggestion has been mooted that universities should recall the degree conferred on a person if he/she has not updated himself/herself during the last five years. Maybe this suggestion should be taken seriously by the Vice-Chancellors of our universities.

Thirty-seven years ago Pope John Paul II exhorted the Professors of the Gregorian University: “Strive to be constantly creative; do not be too easily satisfied with what was good enough for the past. Have the courage to explore new paths...”⁵

By way of conclusion I would like to request the teachers to bear in mind three things:

1. The goal of education. It is significant that most of the leading educationists of all lands have believed the full flowering of the human on the earth to be the goal of education. A UNESCO study speaks of the development of the complete man or woman. “The physical, intellectual, emotional and ethical integration of the individual into a complete man or woman is a broad definition of the fundamental aim for education. We find this a pedagogic ideal throughout history, in almost all countries, among philosophers and moralists, and among most theoreticians and visionaries of education. It has been one of the fundamental themes of humanist thought in all times. It may have been applied imperfectly, but it has been fruitful and helped to inspire many of the noblest educational enterprises”.⁶

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2. The danger of faulty education. Some years back a Headmaster wrote to every teacher of the school:

Dear Teacher, I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness:

Gas chambers built by learned engineers. Children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So, I am suspicious of education. My requests: Help your students to become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns. Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only if they serve to make children more humane.⁷

3. The value of good education. Way back in 1966 the Kothari Commission on Education observed: “The destiny of India is now being shaped in her classrooms...” A few months before that Vatican II made this remarkable statement: “We can justly consider that the future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping”.⁸

The teachers of today are called to render that service to the generation next.

Notes

1. C.P. Varkey, *Gently And Firmly*, Mumbai; St Pauls, 1995, p. 13.
2. As quoted by C. P. Varkey in *Gently And Firmly*, p. 13.
3. See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, London: Sheed and Ward, 1978, pp. 45 – 55.
4. As reported by C.P. Varkey, *Gently and Firmly*, p. 14.
5. Souvenir of the Pope’s visit: *John Paul II at the Gregorian University and the Biblical Institute, Rome*, 1979, p. 27.
6. E. Faure and Others, *Learning to Be*, Delhi, Unesco, 1973, p. 156.
7. As quoted by C.P. Varkey, *Gently And Firmly*, pp. 19- 20.
8. Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Rome, 1965, n. 31.