**Philosophy of Teaching**

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**Background: From Plato to Christ**

My inspiration for teaching comes from my own undergraduate college experience. At Cornell College, there was a small cadre of extremely gifted teacher-scholars who mentored students into a life-long love of learning. There was also — and this was equally important — a large group of students who were absolutely in earnest about reading a wide variety of classic texts, discussing important ideas together, and arguing until the early hours of the morning over fundamental issues.

During my freshman year, I took a course in which we read Plato’s *Gorgias*, after which my life was never to be the same: not because I became a devoted Platonist, but because I saw modeled in Socrates a dedication to clarity of thought and a love of Truth, Justice, and Beauty that awakened my admiration and spurred a desire to become like that great “lover of wisdom.”

What reading Plato’s dialogues gave me was a new self-awareness and a new sense of freedom. Plato’s dialogues gave me a sense of what it was to examine my life with respect to the kinds of choices I was making and to ask myself the fundamental question: Why? Why am I making the choices I am making? Are the choices I’m making, making me happy? Are they making me better off and more fulfilled as a full and complete human person? Reading Plato made me consider such questions for the first time. And I began to understand what Socrates meant when he said at his trial that “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

Eventually, during my senior year of college, I made the choice to become Christian and enter the Catholic Church. When people ask, “What led to your conversion,” I often tell them: “Reading Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero convinced me that there were such things as Truth, Goodness, and Beauty; that they were the fit objects of study for the human person; and that one ought to spend one’s life in search of them. Unbeknownst to me at the time, however, I had put myself on a road that had only one end: it couldn’t help but lead me to Christ, the *Logos* made flesh.”

I fear describing my conversion in this way, however, can make it seem entirely too “intellectual.” In truth, I believe no conversion is *entirely* intellectual. Such existential choices are always a matter of responding with one’s whole being to the fundamental human need for wholeness and meaning. Faith, in the end, is a response made possible by God’s gracious gifts, not primarily by human effort — least of all, in this case, mine. I was mostly unaware of the path God had set me on until I awoke one day to find myself standing before the door of the Church, having only to knock. It was the last place in the world I expected to be.

**My Approach to Teaching**

One of the ideas that especially appealed to me then, and has ever since, was Socrates’ statement that he was merely a “mid-wife” who helped give birth to new ideas in his students. I remember as well how profoundly inspiring I found this same idea enunciated by the famous Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, when he spoke of the value of “indirect communication.” A student cannot simply “take” my ideas. At best, my comments in class can only be “prompts” for deeper consideration. For the student to hold something as true, he or she must go through his or her own process of consideration and acceptance. My job is to help my students ask the right sort of questions and then guide and coach them to reason well, think clearly, and be absolutely truthful with themselves and others.

Another fundamental principle that I learned from reading Plato was the admonition “Know Thyself.” It was a statement that I only began to appreciate more fully later in life when I saw it at the head of an encyclical by a Pope who was to have an immense influence on my life and teaching. Pope John Paul II wrote in the opening lines of his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* that “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know Himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.” Reading this encyclical caused me to want to inspire my students to become more self-aware—that is to “know themselves”—in much the same way that I was given the opportunity to come to a greater self-awareness during my college years. I want my teaching not only to *inform* my students, but to *inspire* them. I want my students not only to see the world more clearly, but to understand its beauty and importance. And my hope is that, by understanding the world’s beauty and importance more fully, they will similarly learn to love it more truly and care for it more faithfully.

**Nature of the Pedagogy**

I want my students to have the self-awareness to see the direction in which their lives are already headed and the courage to face the fundamental questions of meaning which pervade human life, precisely so that they can make free choices about what direction they wish to give to their lives. An important part of my pedagogy, therefore, involves making my students aware of themselves as free agents engaged in the process of learning. I want them to be aware enough of themselves as learners that they can engage in fundamentally reflective acts of “meta-cognition”: that is, I want them to be able to think about their thinking and be aware of their own process of learning. For teaching not to be mere propaganda or manipulation, students should understand what they are doing, where they are headed, and why.

Coaching students effectively so that they will develop the *tools* for life-long learning is another of the fundamental goals of my teaching. The *tools* I have in mind include the ability to *read analytically*, to *think critically*, and to *write clearly* and with passion. Developing and perfecting those skills is, I am convinced, another crucial way in which students can be empowered to better “know themselves” and the world.

When my students read, it is very important to me that they learn to see *connections*: connections within different parts of the text, connections between premises and conclusions, connections between the author’s cultural presuppositions and premises, and the connections between different world-views and different sorts of cultural presuppositions. In short, I want the students appreciate the author’s writing in its own terms, while appreciating the lasting relevance and potential importance of what is being said. I want them to appreciate the beauty of well-crafted words, as well as of a well-crafted argument. In short, I want them to begin to appreciate the power of language.

In the end, however, I believe analysis must culminate in appreciation: appreciation of beauty, truth, and goodness. The intellect fed by a greater and greater appreciation of the truth, must also be animated by *love*—love of the truth, yes, but also of God and neighbor. Education in its truest sense should prepare the student for a life of learning characterized by a love of wisdom, as it should prepare them for a life of service to others animated by love of God and neighbor.