

Teaching Life



*Life Lessons for Aspiring
(and Inspiring) Teachers*

Todd Shy

*"I admired its feeling, candor, and exuberance...
and, of course, its Emersonian hope" —Mark Edmundson*

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For William, Emily, and Katie

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INTRODUCTION

So many books about schools involve big policy proposals, broad culture complaints, and jeremiads about America's declining position in the world of learning. They are long on critique and advice, short on inspiration. When teachers themselves are addressed in books, it's usually in the form of nuts and bolts—how to write curriculum, how to manage a classroom—as if the vision and inspiration for teaching young people just happens on its own. Imagine travel books that focus only on the logistics of travel and never narrate the sights and sounds of new places. Imagine astronomers so fascinated by their telescopes they never aim them at actual stars. Imagine chefs who debate and edit recipes without preparing and then sharing and reveling in actual meals.

If the heart of what education is about—the meals, the stars, the travel experience—is missing from too many books about school, it's no wonder creative people balk at entering the profession. Already low in status, relatively modest in pay, why would anyone embrace what Frank McCourt called the “downstairs maid of the professions”?

This book is a quiet alternative to those narratives about schools. It's a celebration of what it is to be a teacher. It's for the people already showing up every day to give their best to students. It's for anyone considering joining those unheralded ranks. It's a “why do” this work—not another “how to.”

INTRODUCTION

I started this project after twenty years in the classroom. Throughout those decades, I noticed something poignant over and over: when I spoke to other people about school or about education, their reactions were tired or cynical. But when I started asking people to tell me about a formative teacher, or an important teacher, or a favorite teacher, it was a whole different ballgame. I still do this. People light up and lean forward. They're eager to relate what an eighth-grade English teacher or a tenth-grade math teacher did to change their life. The accounts are inspiring, and almost everybody has one. I know I do. Books about teaching, books about schools need to capture some of that love, that beauty, that inspiration, that heart. We have too many telescopes and not enough stars.

I have a personal stake in this too, as the book's structure makes clear. *Teaching Life* begins with a letter to my daughters, one a graduate student determined to join the teaching ranks, the other, as I write, already starting her first job with Teach for America. I am, in a way, cheering them both on as I think about what this work involves. I'm thinking of what it will mean for them to be happy and successful in whatever teaching worlds they end up in, and for however long. If the best young minds (and my daughters count as that) are to be attracted to this profession, teaching has to seem to be the artistry it is. It should be seen as a privilege to be a teacher. It should be like working for Doctors Without Borders. *Teaching Life* is my modest contribution to that ennobling.

The world our students are inheriting is only growing more complex and uncertain. The speed of change is dizzying. When I started teaching, I still used chalk on a blackboard, and the whole world, as the Cold War thawed, was assumed to be on a fast track toward democracy—the only game in town. We did not Google because there was no Google, and our little flip phones only made calls. I had this book fully drafted when Covid-19 hit and threw a generational challenge at schools, making seasoned teachers

feel like rookies all over again. I had this book drafted when the killing of George Floyd raised questions also about how schools were addressing racism and inequities, making us all attend to blind spots and biases. How to build sturdy school life when the landscape moves so quickly? How to equip students when you can't see what lies ahead of them?

I add this book to the crowded field of books about education because I think the best way to encourage and sustain great schools is by attracting and nourishing great teachers, and the best way to multiply great teachers is to name what they do and then value what they do so highly that other people with talent and heart and vision and life will want to do it too. It's not the only thing we need. I don't pretend this book is an exhaustive blueprint for forward-thinking schools. But having the very best people in classrooms is indispensable to whatever the right forward-thinking program turns out to be.

For two and half decades now, I have been inspired over and over by colleagues in classrooms. Great teachers are remarkable to witness. Teaching really is an art form. But there are no galleries to display the real work of a teacher—their students are their gallery—there are no teacher-stages for crowds to gather in front of, no college-style video Great Courses singling out prominent practitioners. It is patient, unsung work. For their sake, and for our schools, I want to sing it here.

LESSON 1

WHAT TEACHING IS FOR

It is ominous, a presumption of crime, that this word Education has so cold, so hopeless a sound. A treatise on education, a convention for education, a lecture, a system, affects us with slight paralysis and a certain yawning of the jaws.

— Emerson

Dear Katie and Emily:

I know one of you has been thinking hard about teaching as a career for a long time now, and the other has dived right into the classroom after college. With two parents in the profession, you were destined, or doomed, to at least consider this work! I'm all for it, even though, over the years, when I've told people what I do, the responses range from "thank you for your service" to "better you than me."

When I sat down to write this, I wasn't thinking about advice so much as vista, vantage. I want you both to see what the profession can be, at its best, and so to think of your relationship to what it is—before you get swept up in the frenzy of the days. That's my bias, I suppose, for an examined life. At any rate, plenty of people can show you the ropes of the daily work: how to organize and manage a class, how to give feedback, how to run a meeting with parents, how to design units and collaborate with colleagues. All that. It's

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hard, and it's the work, and I'm not downplaying it at all, but I'm going to stay big and broad here. I want to help you think about the why and the what first, not the how. And while I began with you in mind and determined to tell you everything relevant I think I've learned in my more than twenty years of teaching, I ended up thinking about my colleagues too, and everybody else in your shoes considering the craft, and all the parents of students we all teach who could use a reminder about what we're really trying to do in school, and to administrators, who make or break a school with the priorities they focus on. And I want to clarify up front that these are my reflections about teaching not about education. I'm not equipped to make policy pronouncements. My experiences are too narrow for that, my biography too small. Also, I've grown tired of books about schools (and other things) that sound like jeremiads rather than poetry. Not that I don't think there are good fights to be joined, just that that's not what I'm setting out to do here. As Dante put it: not the flight for these particular wings. My gray-haired preference is for something that affirms. Read lots of other perspectives, tap other sources of expertise. Take what you will from this one, then read everything else you can. The best teachers have a polymath streak and are tireless lifelong learners. Let this be one of a thousand points of view you absorb as you form your own.

I didn't attend great schools growing up. I think you two probably know this. But I did have a few crucial teachers. The most important one I ever had was an eleventh-grade English teacher who wore a sweater over her shoulders, rarely left her stool at the front of the room, never raised her voice, was as methodical as a nurse, but who changed my life nonetheless by recognizing that something was stirring in me because of the novels we were reading in her class. She saw something happening, and she gave it space and encouragement. In the small mountain town where I grew up, far from universities and museums, a middle-aged, unmarried graduate of Radford

College, Ms. Acuff, loaned me books, suggested writers I might read, pointed me to a store downtown that sold stationery and greeting cards and figurines, but also, off to one side, two cases of literary books that were different from the books at B. Dalton's at the mall. You had to walk behind the cash register to even access the shelves. I bought my first John Updike and Philip Roth novels there. I bought a collection of poems by E.E. Cummings. I bought a paperback of *Crime and Punishment* that I still have on a shelf, list price 75 cents, an impressionistic Raskolnikov face on the cover. I got those books because of Ms. Acuff. She paid attention to me and saw something like curiosity, like life, going on in my young mind, and she nourished it with knowledge I didn't have about what to do with whatever it was that was quickening inside. She changed my life without getting off her stool.

My history teacher that same year, Mr. Mitchell, couldn't have been more different. He was an old-school lecturer so entertaining—and forbidding—students never interrupted him with questions. He didn't invite questions either. When we walked into class, he would be busy writing an exhaustive outline on the board—he filled two walls of boards with notes—then he would go down the hall to get a drink of water while we copied what he'd written, and when he came back he would start lecturing and not stop until the bell rang. Unless we were taking a test, every day was exactly the same. Nothing like the student-centered way we're told to teach now. I remember hearing the audio of filmstrips playing in the adjacent history room, but we never watched filmstrips in our class. Mr. Mitchell had too much to say. He spent summer vacations visiting historical sites and would tell stories about his travels. He mined biographies for quirky facts, reveled in presidential nicknames like Old Kinderhook (Martin Van Buren) and Rutherford B. Hayes. He loved the military and hoped his son would go to one of the academies. In the mountain South, almost everyone was religious, and in

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our tax-payer-funded public school, Mr. Mitchell didn't hesitate to talk about "the precious blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." We spent close to a month studying—that is, listening to him talk about—the Civil War. The Battle of Chancellorsville, where Stonewall Jackson was critically wounded, still made Mr. Mitchell, after all these years describing it, go solemn. He loved history, and for all the blind spots and missed perspectives I recognize now, his passion, and his person, his personality, his life, still live in my memory. He was fully inside whatever subject he lectured on, but when you spoke with him one on one he didn't look you directly in the eye, and his neck, I remember, from collar to jaw, was covered with a razor burn that made him seem vulnerable, even hurt. He wore short-sleeved dress shirts and the era's wide ties. He gave back tests high grade to low, so that you always knew who had conquered, who had bombed.

How vivid these formative teachers remain. I loved Mr. Mitchell, and your grandmother always thought he was the teacher who changed my life because I would talk about him, but it was Ms. Acuff, quietly holding me back after class, who did the deeper work. It was Ms. Acuff who, when I went back in my forties to speak at a local college, I invited because I wanted to pay tribute to her publicly and did. Working on this book, I looked her up on the internet and was devastated to discover her obituary and thought there could be no other student of her hundreds and hundreds of students who could possibly be as grateful or as grief-stricken as I was. And it's interesting to me that I, who am such a sucker for the larger-than-life figure, full of quirk, claim as my most important teacher someone calm and quiet as Walden Pond.

When I celebrate transformational teaching in the pages to come, I'm not thinking of a single type of charisma. Not every class has to be the *Dead Poets Society*—not many of them should be! I never tried to be Mr. Mitchell; you probably really shouldn't stand on your desk like Robin Williams (though I *have* walked on tables while reading a poem by Billy

Collins). Also, not every teacher has to inspire every kid. So, free yourself of that pressure. But somewhere along the line, all students should encounter someone who rearranges things and sets them on a path, and in an ideal world schools would be filled with teams of teachers who consider themselves a community existing to do just that. Some kids will be mobilized by you; others by the teacher across the hall who you don't even maybe get along with all that well. I never saw Mr. Mitchell and Ms. Acuff exchange a word—not once! Inspiration is quiet teamwork, and while it's not the job description in full, being a teacher filled with life who inspires life in students seems to me the condition of everything else we want school to be. Until interest and life have been mobilized, we're orchestrating activity but not yet really educating. Great teachers are filled with purpose and joy. They themselves are alive to something, and it's infectious with their students. And that's how transformation begins.

One thing that nags anyone thinking of teaching below the college level, and one thing you need to stare down from the outset, is the status of the job—or the perception of low status. A fairly recent book called *The Teacher Wars* by Dana Goldstein is a compelling history of the profession in America. Add it to your list. I assume you're keeping a list of things you want to read someday? At your age you should still want to try to read almost everything. When you get to my age, what you'll want instead is to reread a few big things—and take walks on the beach. (Come visit me.)

Anyway, I'm of two minds about the question of status. One the one hand, it shouldn't matter. Those of us who teach know the rewards are different: they're personal, emotional, and lasting. I taught with someone who was a television producer until he came to our school. His father was a teacher, and my colleague had gone to his retirement party and heard all these accounts of what his father had done, what his impact was, and he decided nobody was going to pay those kinds of tributes to him in the work he was in. He's

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teaching now, this former producer. Another colleague told me at lunch one day that he received an email from a former student who is teaching in Mongolia. He had written a long note to say how my colleague had changed his life in 10th grade. “What did you do for him?” I asked. “I watched him,” my colleague said. “For several months I watched him, then I figured something out about him, and I named it for him. Then I said, because you’re *that*, you should think about trying *this*.” And there was the magic. He saw something, and then he used what he saw to provoke something else. And now that kid is off in Mongolia recalling it. “What do you think you did?” I asked my colleague. “He had it inside him,” he said. “But when I saw it and named it, that pulled it out into the open where he could see it too.” Relationships and encounters—people and experiences—are always the foundation of great teaching. And as infuriating and repetitive as the days can be, those rewards really do compensate for the lack of larger status the profession deserves.

Having said that, I’m jealous for the profession too. It shouldn’t be seen as a second family-income job, supplementing the breadwinner. It often is. It shouldn’t be the case that teachers who need to make more money have to look to become administrators. The number of teachers I know who tutor for extra money would astonish you. I did it one year too. I needed the money. And when we lived in North Carolina, I taught every summer at a program for rising high school seniors, and that was car-repair money, or that set of new tires we needed, or birthday-present money, or unexpected-dentist-bill money. Teaching shouldn’t be a fallback for people who decide *real* academic work is not for them. Be wary of trying to teach up, by the way. If you want to teach college kids, become a professor. Don’t teach high school kids like it’s college. If you teach middle school, don’t envy the high school teacher. Give yourself to the students you have. Don’t teach up.

And while it’s ridiculous to be consoled by this, for what

it's worth, here are some heavyweights who spent time teaching below the college level: Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, D.H. Lawrence, Vincent van Gogh, Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Bronte, Louisa May Alcott, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Countee Cullen, James Baldwin, Agnes Martin, Lyndon Johnson, Tolstoy, Thoreau, Roberta Flack! Pretty good company.

I'm not sure exactly how the two of you are thinking about it. I was one of those people who backed into teaching. I didn't have a vision for it at first; I just thought I might be good at it. It didn't instantly transform as a calling either. The way I'm writing about it here *is* a vision, but it took years for that to form. I think that's one reason I'm writing this now. I want people in your shoes to see what the work really is and what it can be, because once you're in it, it can be like riding a bicycle in front of a fire engine just to keep up with daily demands. Before you begin, make sure you've at least asked the big questions: What is teaching really about? What are we trying to do every day when we stand in front of students? Why are we there, and what are we hoping for? Too many people answer these questions small. They imagine themselves as bricklayers with no conception of what's being built. Their job, as they see it, is to mortar one brick on top of another and keep their head down. They are not building monuments or cathedrals. They're laying bricks. I suspect most are content for the people above them somewhere to have the answers, to know the design, to be able to say how each bricklaying task is part of something larger. And those borrowed answers are often wildly inadequate and uninspiring. They usually involve filling student toolkits with skills. That's usually the extent of it. That and preparing students for the next level of work—what John Dewey dismissed as “mere preparation.” More on that later. And you can't know what a school or a classroom is for unless you have some sense in yourself of what a life is for. So, take your time figuring that out as you launch. What I'm hoping to do

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here is to help you think about this profession as an art form, as a vision thrumming with life, so that you're not one of those who answers questions about teaching too small.

Before I spend all my energy on that cause, I owe it to you raise a question and maybe even some doubts. Certainly, if you listen to policy debates and read articles and books about the direction of education, you won't recognize your father's credo and you won't encounter the word inspiration very often at all. Instead, you'll encounter words like standards and skills, assessments and accountabilities. These aren't insidious. Part of the job is absolutely holding students accountable for learning and being yourself accountable for their growth. I'm not advocating a free-for-all educational community in which Romantic teachers do whatever feels best to them, and students are magically, mystically transformed. It never feels like that. Students should be asked to do hard things, even things they don't want to do at all.

A lot of the time, even if your commitments sound like Emerson, your days will feel like a traffic cop's. Teaching is hard and exhausting. There's a reason talented people walk away. Every day it's like the starter's pistol firing, and from the moment students start walking through the door until the last one leaves, you're *on*: performing, parenting, intuiting, assessing, collaborating, creating, redirecting, corralling. And then you have papers to grade and meetings to attend, and you take work home, and the whole thing starts all over again the next morning. That's the demoralizing part. It keeps coming at you. You spend a week grading a big stack of papers then groan inside when you give a next assignment that will repeat the load for the following week. And so on. It's Sisyphean. And you can't really have a down day because your students go on showing up. You will almost certainly barely have time to eat lunch. You might struggle for enough passing privacy to make a phone call to your doctor. Parents will sometimes call administrators to complain about things their kids said you did or didn't do, or, because they went to

school and so know something about the job second-hand, don't hesitate to challenge your decisions or approaches. I've had parents chide my teaching choices by referring to the great teacher their kid had *before* me at another school. It can be too much. A colleague admits she called home every night her first-year teaching just to get a pep talk from her family. I still see myself my first year on the job, books spread all over the spare bedroom of our first apartment (beside the crib each of you used), working on weekends to stay exactly one week ahead of my three preps—and doing it again the next weekend. A mound of work a week at a time. I had a colleague once who had to stand up at a parent-teacher conference and ask a father to leave; he was being that rude. I had another friend who had to pull the activity bus over on the shoulder of an interstate to quiet students down—because she was the only adult on the bus. My own humanities team and I were rebuked by a security guard at the Metropolitan Museum of Art because a few of our kids could not follow directions and control themselves, much less be inspired by “The Death of Socrates.” Read Frank McCourt's memoir *Teacher Man* for a dozen other indignities. The job burns people out for good reasons.

But it also inspires. Well into my fifties now, I remain committed to Emerson's ideal that the goal of education should be “commensurate with the goal of life.” An ambiguity flows out of this claim that is encouraging, at least to me: Why should education have ground rules of certainty that the rest of our life doesn't offer? And if we're equipping students for the life in front of them, not for tests we think prove certain achievements, why shouldn't school have the same dynamic of trial and error, hesitation, experiment, and varieties of feedback that our actual life does? And why, if we want our life to be animated with passion and curiosity and interest and accomplishment, should school be anything other than the first draft of that? Why teach recipes without preparing meals? Schools should be full of feeling and variety

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and curiosity and challenges and community because that's what the world can feel like. If school were a smaller part of a young person's life, it might be forgivable to focus on the transmission of key skills. But since school, for students, is a full-time job plus daily work to take home, stretching across a dozen and more formative years, it should be worthy of all the time and attention we ask of them. It shouldn't be what students too often experience it as: a placeholder, mere preparation, awaiting the real life to come. School should do what Tolstoy said art should do: *make people love life*.

If school shouldn't be boring, books about school shouldn't be either. If the condition of great teaching is, as I'm insisting, vitality and its incitement, then writing about school can't afford to be lifeless. Books about love might focus on the biochemistry of the thing, or the evolution of the thing, or the cultural determinants of the thing, but at some point we need poets and novelists and songwriters—and everyday people in love—to give us the thing itself. School also has a *thing itself*, and it's not reducible to data or curriculum or policy. That thing itself is probably best captured in portraits and stories.

And so, remarkable children of mine, I'm thinking about you in the context of all these mediations on teaching. If thinking about what I would say to you as you head down this path has me also thinking of others, you sparked the idea, and, anyway, if it doesn't help you, I don't imagine it will help anyone else. And while I won't veer off to truly personal advice or elaborate on how proud I am of you both or call you by your nicknames in front of everyone who stumbles across these reflections, even beginning to write this makes me remember you both young. I used to say to one of you, stop growing up so fast! You always replied, I can't help it, as if I were missing the most obvious thing in the world. I remember picking one of you up from your first day at preschool. You had your fingers in your mouth, and you were clinging to Ms. Lenora's long summer skirt. Right, Ms.

Lenora? I remember dropping one of you off for your first day of kindergarten. The principal scolded me for getting out of the car to shoot video. You're holding up the drop-off line, she said sternly. I'm a teacher, I wanted to fire back, claiming professional solidarity—but I didn't. On the last day of kindergarten for the other of you, I got my video camera out to record the milestone. What was your favorite thing this year? I asked. The work, you said. I tried to press you for details. What about the work, what part of it? I asked. You got sad more than upset, as if I'd hurt your feelings. Just, the work, you said, holding back your patient tears. In college, you both sought out ways to travel overseas, full of curiosity and fearlessness. One of you texted me once: my school is sponsoring a trip to the opera in New York; I'll be bored, right, but I should go, right, to see the Met? You went. The other of you went in quest of the Great Barrier Reef, before, you told me, it's not there to see. People often think younger generations are knowing and cool, but you two have wonder and warmth. I'm dizzily proud of you.

And since we dragged in the Met, I'll close my introduction with this: One Christmas a few years back, I attended a performance of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos at Lincoln Center. It was one of the best things I've ever done. The music itself was magical, but it was also that the performers were so exuberant, so committed to the piece. Occasionally one of the violinists almost leapt, going up on one foot like Cupid. Another turned his body back and forth like a matador. Two violinists, facing off in musical conversation, nodded tribute to each other at movement's end, while the audience applauded. And it felt like the answer to a thousand tough questions I couldn't quite articulate. Greatness. Artistry. Inspiration. Lift. This book is my argument that teaching can achieve something like that too.