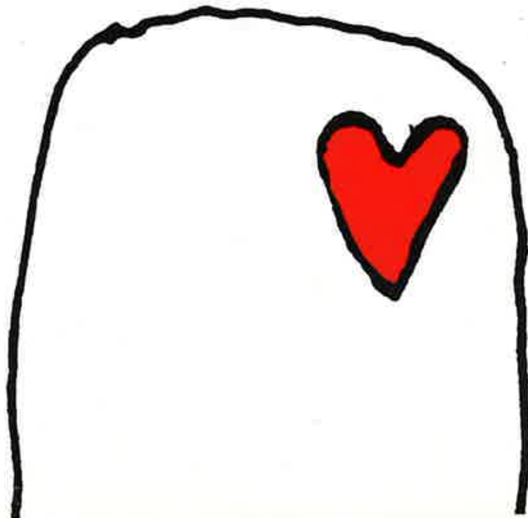
The Art of TEACHING



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how far he pushed ahead during that period, persuade him that his profits there are inalienable, and, if you feel it wise, explain how the present period of work will dovetail into the earlier. Usually he will appear unconsoled. The young are easily changed, therefore they like to pose as being immutable. But after going away he will look back over the immediate past—his own, handmade, unique, indestructible past, the work that has become part of himself—and he will start again with new energy to hammer out his future.

Such pupils you must know. You must know the geniuses, the loonies, and the weaklings, all the eccentrics. You must know some of them for your own protection —in the same way as a wise physician with a new paranoiac patient telephones his previous doctor to get a complete history of his weaknesses and treatment. Others you must learn in order to draw the maximum out of them, and put the maximum in. The rest, the typical students, you need hardly know as separate persons.

But—one last word—never let them feel that they are only types: that would be quite wrong. If they ask for personal advice, it is your duty to give it freely and pleasantly. If they have special inclinations, they will be delighted to hear you discuss them. You should not, however, feel it your responsibility to know every single one of your pupils as well as you know the special individuals whom we have been discussing—since average youngsters, being easier to educate in a class and more friendly to the rest of their group, do not need such particular attention.

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So far, we have said that a good teacher should know his subject, and, within limits, know his pupils. There is another necessary qualification. He or she should know much else. The good teacher is a man or woman of exceptionally wide and lively intellectual interests. It is useless to think of teaching as a business, like banking or insurance: to learn the necessary quota of rules and facts, to

apply them day by day as the bank-manager applies his, to go home in the evening and sink into a routine of local gossip and middle-brow relaxation (radio, TV, the newspaper, and the detective-story), to pride oneself on being an average citizen, indistinguishable from the dentist and the superintendent of the gas-works—and then to hope to stimulate young and active minds. Teachers in schools and colleges must see more, think more, and understand more than the average man and woman of the society in which they live. This does not only mean that they must have a better command of language and know special subjects, such as Spanish literature and marine biology, which are closed to others. It means that they must know more about the world, have wider interests, keep a more active enthusiasm for the problems of the mind and the inexhaustible pleasures of art, have a keener taste even for some of the superficial enjoyments of life—yes, and spend the whole of their career widening the horizons of their spirit. Most people, as we see, stop growing between thirty and forty. They "settle down"—a phrase which implies stagnation—or at the utmost they "coast along," using their acquired momentum, applying no more energy, and gradually slowing down to a stop. No teacher should dream of doing this. His job is understanding a large and important area of the world's activity and achievement and making it viable for the young. He should expect to understand more and more of it as the years go by.

He has two special functions that make him different from other professional men and from the business-men and workers in his community.

The first of these is to make a bridge between school or college and the world. It is really very hard for the young to understand why they are shut up in classrooms and taught skills such as trigonometry, while the "real world" hums and clatters and shouts beyond the windows. They submit, poor creatures, but the pressure required to keep them there is intense. If they are allowed to think that school or college is an ingenious prison, a

squirrel-cage in which they must whirl uselessly for a few years until they are let out, they will profit little or nothing from it. They may resent it bitterly. They cannot be told directly or convincingly how learning trigonometry will fit into their future existence: partly because no one really knows which of them will turn out to be a bridge-engineer or will make some now unimagined discovery in ballistics, partly because they themselves cannot realize the value of mathematical thinking during their adolescence and youth, and partly because they cannot foresee even the outlines of their adult lives. But they should be given to understand in as many ways as possible that the two worlds are closely and necessarily connected, and that light and energy from one flow into the other.

This is often done by "making subjects relevant." Little German boys used to be trained in mathematics by getting problems about the number of pounds of explosive required to demolish a (non-German) viaduct. Some teachers of English use current magazines like *Time* to demonstrate vivid and concise writing. Certainly every teacher of a modern foreign language ought to use the newspapers and films produced in that language. But this idea cannot be applied to all subjects, nor to some of the most valuable subjects, while in others it often leads to superficiality and lowers intellectual standards.

The best way to do it is for the teacher to make *himself* relevant. Nine thousand times more pupils have learnt a difficult subject well because they felt the teacher's vitality and energy proved its value than because they chose the subject for its own sake. If a youth, sizing up the professor of medieval history, decides that he is a tremendous expert in the history of the Middle Ages and a deadly bore in everything else, he is apt to conclude that medieval history makes a man a deadly bore. If on the other hand he finds that the man is filled with lively interest in the contemporary world, that he actually knows more about it because, through his training, he understands it better, that the practice of the intellectual life,

so far from making him vague and remote, has made him wise and competent, the youth will conclude without further evidence that medieval history is a valuable interest.

The good teacher is an interesting man or woman. As such, he or she will make the work interesting for the students, in just the same way as he or she talks interestingly and writes an interesting letter. Most teaching is done by talking. If your mind is full of lively awareness of the world, you will never be at a loss for new points of view on your own subject. Novel illustrations will constantly suggest themselves to you. You will discard outworn types of argument and find fresh ones. Allusions and reminiscences will brighten your talk and keep your audience from suffering the awful torture of feeling that it knows exactly what you are going to say next. Much teaching consists in explaining. We explain the unknown by the known, the vague by the vivid. The students usually know so little that they are delighted to hear you explain what you know and tie it up with what they are trying to understand. A colleague of mine in Paris used to have great difficulty, when discussing *Don Quixote,* in convincing his intelligent youngsters that Quixote was not merely a farcical old lunatic who should have been locked up. Then he described a series of bull-fights he had seen on a holiday in Seville, with their cruelty, their pride, their useless courage, which is an art in itself, and the oddity of sixteenth-century costumes in a Roman arena for a twentieth-century entertainment, which struck none of the Spaniards as odd; and he reminded them of the same Spanish pride and idealism as expressed in tragedy by the French master Corneille. Then his pupils began to understand that their own standards had not been complex enough for judging all the world's great books, and that Don Quixote's insanity might be a kind of strange sense. From that point the discussions used to develop in a dozen equally interesting and instructive directions.

The second function of the teacher is to make a bridge

between youth and maturity. He has to interpret adult life to the young in such a way as to make them adults. To do this, he should belong to both worlds.

Many teachers find this extremely difficult. Some schoolmasters in Britain "live for the school." This means that their horizon is bounded at one edge by the preparatory institutions from which the youngsters come and on the other by the colleges to which they go. The great events of their lives are school cricket-matches and scholarship examinations. Like some officers of the regular army, they will talk for hours about the flap in Ingoldsby's unit, and "Whatever became of old Snoggins?" but they grow embarrassed when asked about new books or contemporary politics. At the other extreme are teachers who care less than nothing for the hopes and fears and gaieties of the young, who never open the college magazine or watch a school football game, who feel it is an infringement on their dignity to spend nearly every day with children and adolescents, and who would obviously be happier if all their pupils were fifty years old and graying at the temples.

Difficult though this bridge-building between two worlds may be, it is possible; it is necessary; it is done by the best teachers. After all, no one is entirely and exclusively thirty-three years old, or forty-eight, or whatever his legal age may be. Watch any group of people enjoying themselves, vividly interested, and you will see them growing decades younger. Within every one of us, not far from the surface, lie hidden many personalities, some of them as young as childhood, and only one as old as today. The good teacher will be able to draw vitality and variety from the younger layers of personality which are still alive within him, and to know what it is to be a youth again, or a boy, without ceasing to be a man.

For example, he will notice and remember not only the things that interest him as an adult, but those things which used to interest him as a youngster. If he does, and if he uses them to illustrate his teaching but discusses them from a mature level, his teaching will become easier

and his explanations clearer. The young are not very deep and consistent thinkers, but they are highly sensitive to new impressions: so they notice things like fanciful advertising campaigns, eccentric new personalities, peculiar rather than essential pieces of news, far more than grown-ups do. They do not think much about such things, but—since they have not yet become blasé and have no very intense inner life—they do experience them. Allusions to such things therefore can clarify a difficult discussion. At the moment this is being written, for instance, it would be wise for anyone trying to explain the ancient Greek "tyrants," those ambitious independent despots, to begin by talking of Marshal Tito. Although the parallel is not really close, it is helpful.

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One of the most important qualities of a good teacher is humor. Many are the purposes it serves. The most obvious one is that it keeps the pupils alive and attentive because they are never quite sure what is coming next. Another is that it does in fact help to give a true picture of many important subjects. Suppose you are discussing English literature of the early nineteenth century. If you confine yourself to talking about Wordsworth's lyrical simplicity, and Shelley pinnacled dim in the intense inane, you will be giving an incomplete picture of the group; whereas if you also d-d-describe Ch-Charles Lamb as both f-funny and ch-charming, and bring out the weird boyish comedy of some of Wordsworth's other poems, and read some of Byron's rougher letters, you will then establish the idea that these men were rich and varied and human personalities, not "classics" cast in a single mold of solid bronze, and you can proceed all the better to explain both the nobility of their achievement and the sadness of their failures.

Of course some subjects, notably the sciences, do not admit humorous treatment. There the wise teacher will continue to introduce flashes of humor extraneously, because he knows that fifty-five minutes of work plus five

minutes' laughter are worth twice as much as sixty minutes of unvaried work.

Some teachers speak of humor as a useful instrument with which to control their classes. This is a dangerous notion. Those who harbor it often make the mistake of using humor as nineteenth-century schoolmasters used the cane, to terrify the refractory and spur the slow. They begin by mocking a particular set of mistakes. Then they make fun of the boys who make these mistakes. Then they develop a bitter wit which thrives on every kind of personal defect, ruthlessly exposed. They will even feel aggrieved if no boy in their class happens to be a fit subject for satire, and will single out a perfectly innocuous youth simply because they cannot teach without having a butt. They are like the Oriental monarchs who always had a few malefactors impaled before their gates, to remind the citizenry that the master's word was law. Perhaps they would enjoy that comparison, for they are usually so petty and insecure that they would like to be maharajahs. I should compare them rather to the magpies of the Western states which will find a sore patch on a horse's back and perch on it, picking out raw flesh and squawking with self-satisfaction, until the horse runs mad down a cliff-side.

Kipling, who suffered a good deal of torture during his childhood, got this treatment first from his guardians (see *Something of Myself*, Chapter ii) and then from the master whom he immortalized as "King" (note the regal pseudonym) in *Stalky & Co.* What "King" did to him certainly kept him mentally alert; and he says he enjoyed it and profited from it; but it helped to increase that timidity and hypersensitivity which spoilt much of his adult life, and it did something to produce his very odd belief in the pulverizing force of ridicule as a political weapon (see, for instance, "Little Foxes," "As Easy as A.B.C.," and "The Village that Voted the Earth was Flat"), his absolute trust in authority, and his almost delighted contempt for lesser breeds without the Law. If he had only had a teacher like Kim's Lama, he would have been wiser

and much happier. But part of his spirit was sacrificed to a schoolmaster who, perhaps, as some schoolmasters also do, detected and resented the superior intellectual brilliance of the grubby boy with the big glasses, and tried to make himself feel great by making young Rudyard Kipling feel small.

No, humor must not be used to tyrannize a class. It seldom is so used. Usually irony and sarcasm are used, because they imply intellectual domination; but not humor. The real purpose of humor in teaching is deeper and more worthy. It is to link the pupils and the teacher, and to link them through enjoyment. A very wise old teacher once said: "I consider a day's teaching is wasted if we do not all have one hearty laugh." He meant that when people laugh together, they cease to be young and old, master and pupils, workers and driver, jailer and prisoners, they become a single group of human beings enjoying its existence.

Jules Romains, the eminent French novelist and dramatist, began his career by working out a theory which he later put into several excellent plays and stories. This is the idea that collections of people remain individuals until a single event or purpose or emotion molds them into groups, and that then the group lives, feels, and thinks in a way of its own, superior in energy and intensity to the activity of any one of its members. Sometimes, no doubt, a collective emotion is silly or degrading, as in a riot or a panic. But sometimes, Romains believes, it can be a truly ennobling experience: it is our duty to understand such experiences fully when they come. To be a member of a meeting which is moved by an energetic speaker to take a generous resolution; to applaud with a crowd of friends when your own team, making a huge effort, wins; to share the emotion of actors and audience at the production of a good new play; to walk through a city and feel yourself part of its beating and driving life—these are worthy emotions, which help us out of our own pettiness.

Romains called this theory Unanimism. Obviously it

has its dangers. It leads very easily to the annulment of the individual, to the denial of intelligence, to "thinking with the blood" and believing that the majority is always right. Because it is easy to misapply, and because he knows that no eminent artist has ever been tied to one single theory, Romains has not concentrated on preaching and exploiting the doctrine. But it runs through most of his best work, and has inspired several younger writers. Now, Romains was for some time a teacher in French high schools. One of the most winning figures in his *Men of Good Will* is the schoolmaster Clanricard, while several others are in fact teachers though they are ostensibly priests, doctors, and authors. Although he got his first glimpse of Unanimism in a busy Paris street, I am sure that he confirmed it from his experiences as a pupil and as a teacher. For one of the greatest pleasures in teaching comes from those hours when you feel that every word you say is being heard, not by a collection of bored and dutiful individuals, but instead by a group which you create and which in turn creates you; that, instead of repeating facts learnt by rote, to be telephoned through the drowsy air to half-deaf ears and garbled down in notebooks, you are both stirring minds to ask questions and answering them; that you are being driven by the energy of the young on the search for truth, and drawing therefrom the power to lead the search; and, in fact, that you and your words and the class which listens and thinks are all part of the ceaseless activity of human Reason.

Your pupils will feel this too. If the feeling exists at all, it will be shared. To create it, or to help it to come into being, is one of the teacher's main tasks. It cannot exist unless there is a rapport, a give-and-take, something like a unanimist relationship between the pupils and the teacher. One of the means of establishing that rapport is humor. When a class and its teacher all laugh together, they cease for a time to be separated by individuality, authority, and age. They become a unit, feeling pleasure and enjoying the shared experience. If that community

can be prolonged or re-established, and applied to the job of thinking, the teacher will have succeeded.

This can also be put in terms of traditional psychology. There are two powerful instincts which exist in all human beings, and which can be used in teaching. These are *gregariousness* and *the love of play*. Give fifty men four hours to cross a hill and walk down the valley beyond to the nearest town. If they try it separately, many will come in late, and nearly all will be tired. If they march in groups, they will be far less tired and come in sooner. If they do it in two teams competing with each other, or as a hiking party singing songs in rhythm, they will scarcely be tired at all, they will keep together, and they will enjoy the experience. In just the same way, if you can get a class of thirty youngsters to feel they are all pulling together, and if you can give them some reason to enjoy it, they will do nine times better work than thirty individuals working under compulsion. And one of the best appeals to both gregariousness and the play-instinct is a good joke.

We said that one function of the teacher was to make a bridge between youth and maturity. If he has a sense of humor, he can build the bridge. The young think their elders are dull. The elders think the young are silly. This is the basis of that mutual misunderstanding of the ages, on which scarcely anything can get done without compulsion. Yet a clever teacher, who can use his sense of humor in such a way as to show the young that not everyone over twenty-five is dead, will at the same time learn enough about his pupils to see that their silliness is only awkwardness, easy to penetrate and dissolve. Both sides will understand each other better, and work together. Togetherness is the essence of teaching.

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Now we have listed the main things that a good teacher will know and like. But what kind of man or woman will the good teacher be? Are there any abilities which are absolutely essential?