*The Best Teacher I Ever Had:
Personal Reports from Highly Productive Scholars*

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We have all had one or more teachers who made some measurable impact on our lives by helping us to discover or nurture possibilities, talents, skills or passions that might otherwise have gone undeveloped or overlooked. Who was your best teacher ever? Author Alex Michalos posed this question to fellows of the Royal Society of Canada, some of whom were fortunate enough to have been mentored by such teachers as J.R.R. Tolkien, Northrop Frye, C.S. Lewis, Robertson Davies and other luminaries. The results were edited and compiled into an engaging read entitled *The Best Teacher I Ever Had: Personal Reports from Highly Productive Scholars*.

The Royal Society of Canada was incorporated by an Act of Parliament in 1883 for persons who achieve exceptional distinction through a body of scholarly publishing or creative work, and who make original contributions in the humanities or sciences. Election to the Society is considered one of the highest honours that can be attained by a Canadian scholar, artist or scientist. Michalos invited the members of the Society to participate in this evaluative process and was able to garner responsive essays from roughly 8% of them. The result is a collection of moving short essays that introduces us to some remarkable teachers who helped shape the thinking of the contributing writers. This book offers a special bonus to those in the teaching field, and that is the long-term impact that a great teacher can have on the career and life of a student.

Michalos offers an insightful compendium of Canadian essayists from a myriad of disciplines: 3 animal biologists, 2 architects, 17 earth scientists, 6 chemists, 2 economists, 6 engineers, 9 historians, 1 interpretive artist, 1 lawyer, 13 specialists in literature, 6 mathematicians, 7 medical scientists, 7 microbiologists, 7 physicists, 6 plant biologists, 5 political scientists, 5 psychologists, 3 specialists in religion, and 8 sociologists. Several of the essayists expressed the view that the most important thing was to “provide an example of a practicing scholar”. Others described their best teacher as being genuine or caring, or unusually accessible. Several reported that their teachers were “totally unselfish” with their time and many remembered a particular teacher’s sense of humour or great story-telling ability, although some “rarely joked or told anecdotes.” Addressing the diversity, one author said, “Great teachers are many-sided; and even in their foibles, they may engender worthwhile responses from their pupils”. Some of the essayists write of specific values that were modeled for them; for example, novelist Carol Shields relates with great passion about the teacher she had in Grades 3 and 4 who she appreciated for unrequested gifts of herself, and for teaching her to love work.

I love work. I love writing about work as well as doing. I had observed that my teacher, Miss Pelsue, loved her job. The signs were unmistakable. She sailed into her classroom in the morning ... prepared joyously for the day: for all that we would do together, the problems we would solve, for the small exchanges between us that arrived like an embrace ... I began to see that my two passions, reading and writing, might become my work. And that my work would ground me in the world.

Other Society members, not able to single out just one teacher, write fervently about two or more influential teachers in their lives. An essay by a pair of mathematician brothers is particularly moving. Ram and Kumar Murty explain the important roles played by their mother, as well as a tutor named Mr. Subbarao, and a few others, in crediting their distinguished careers as mathematicians at Queens and University of Toronto. Their mother emphasized small consistent daily habits that have stayed with them over a lifetime of study:

Each day, at a fixed time, we had to read aloud for 15 minutes and write what we read for another 15 minutes, a habit that has proved to be useful in learning not only new languages but other things as well.

In their early teens, Ram and Kumar moved to Kartoum, Sudan for one year, where they experienced some difficulty adjusting to the *old mathematics* that was being taught there. A friend of the family, Mr. Subbarao, was hired to tutor them and used a rather informal problem-solving approach reminiscent of Dewey's ideas on learning (Baker, 1966).

Mr. Subbarao would give them a problem to solve and wait about ten minutes before he said anything else. If they solved the problem, he would move to the next problem; if not, he would give them a hint and wait another ten minutes. Within a month, they were both achieving first place in their respective classes. Even after there was no further need for Mr. Subbarao, he continued to teach them advanced trigonometry and introduced them to calculus. After that one year in Khartoum, they returned to Canada where they excelled in math. The brothers next encounter an enthusiastic high school teacher, Mr. Howard Edwards-Davies, who they credit with introducing them to scientific collegiality by offering them his collection of the journal *American Mathematical Monthly*.

"Thus a new world was opened up for us and we began to take to these problems. We submitted solutions to the journal and many of them were published....This showed us that there were many people in different countries interested in the same questions."

Other scholars were able to define some specific contributions that a great teacher brought to the classroom. Such was the case for James Gray, Professor Emeritus at Dalhousie University, whose gripping essay comments on how, even some 50 years later, he still covets his notes from the lectures of teacher C.S. Lewis:

For me, the Lewis legacy lies chiefly in the unusual ability he had to open our minds to the great intellectual movements of the past and to their relevance to our time and condition. 'Keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through your mind', he would say. I shall always feel grateful for his sharing, through those beautifully crafted lectures, the infinite riches of a great contemporary mind.

One of the most compelling narratives in Michalos's collection is written by Margaret A. Somerville, who writes about her father, George Patrick Ganley, as her teacher. She interweaves this with her own complex roles as a professor of ethics in faculties of law and medicine at McGill. Professor Somerville has captured the very essence of the collection: the fundamental truth that teaching is about a relationship; it is about communicating to another what we care deeply about. Somerville was fortunate enough to have her own father to serve in such a role. The habits of mind that he was able to engender in her are similar to the current teaching of Coast and Kallick (2000);

[My father] loved learning and powerfully communicated this love to me. He quietly transmitted a sense of awe, wonder, joy and intense curiosity about the tangible and intangible worlds that surround us. He was as interested in talking to me about the stars in the night sky and how to approach an animal in a way that would not frighten it, as how he felt about world affairs and music....he wanted to share with me that which he cared about deeply and which moved him profoundly.

Many of the writers in this collection express a desire to pass on to their students and protégés some of the wisdom that they have learned from their own best teachers. Somerville best articulates exactly which aspects of this mentoring or teaching would be intergenerational and makes the connection for her students of law and medicine:

[I] learned to live as comfortably as possible with unavoidable uncertainty. I often tell my students that [this] is one of the most important lessons they can learn, because it is essential to exercising good judgment in the stressful situations that they will face as physicians or lawyers in professional practice.

He (her father) said that it is the most wonderful thing in life to be always learning, to be open-minded, intellectually curious, exploring and discovering, and that it was a great honour to be regarded as a person who seeks to live life doing this. My father was engaged in life and the universe.

In writing this piece, Somerville came to realize that she is heir to her father's philosophy of life.

In summary, *The Best Teacher I Ever Had: Personal Reports from Highly Productive Scholars* is well worth reading and the table of contents is organized by both author and best teacher, which makes for easy referencing; for example, Carol Shields on Miss Pelsue. Nevertheless, it is unfortunate that Michalos

published every one of the essays submitted to him by the fellows of the Royal Society of Canada, as there were about a dozen of the ninety or so that do not merit inclusion, given their brevity or lack of substance or narrative appeal. Additionally, in the book's introduction, Michalos offers a preliminary summary of the attributes of a great teacher as identified by the fellows of the Royal Society of Canada, yet he makes no attempt to bring forth from the essays the basic constituents of a great teacher. It would have been helpful had he been able to link the comments of the essayists with the perspectives of leading educational thinkers such as Dewey.

This book is published by the University of Western Ontario Press, yet will appeal to a much broader readership than most academic publications. Certainly teachers of all levels and disciplines would be intrigued by the content and concept, considering the stature and writing ability of many of the contributing essayists and of their favourite teachers. The more general reader would also find the subject engaging, since most of us have had at least one teacher who has challenged our thinking or championed a cause that has engaged our passions. This series of evocative essays captures the inspiration and magic of great teachers related by great students.

References:

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