Remembering Teachers of Influence

The Story
When I teach undergraduates at the University of Alberta’s Faculty of Education, on the first day of class, I always ask: “Who is the best teacher you ever had? Why?” Surprisingly, there is no consensus on what makes a truly “best” teacher for each student. I am an old teacher now. After more than 40 years of teaching, I find myself reflecting on some of the key highlights of my teaching and learning. Here, I write this little story of the impact of two teachers on my own learning.

Positive Influences
Most teachers can look back at another teacher who really influenced them at a formative stage of their lives. Sometimes these teachers are good influences; sometimes these teachers are examples of what not to do. Here are two positive influences. What is so interesting, as I look back, is that I am certain these teachers potentially did not influence all students in the same way or that what was positive for me might have been not-so-positive for another student. But these two teachers – Mr. Petresik and Mr. Saires – arrived just at the right time in my life to influence in ways that, at least for me, have had extremely long-term positive results.

Mr. Petresik was a first year English teacher when I was in grade 10 in 1962. I came from a working class family that held a deep hope and deep belief in education, but no one had ever really considered a university education, an education past high school, or generally even through high school. I was the eldest of five children and only my sister – the youngest – and I went on past high school. My father had three rules for living, and I heard over and over again: Rule 1, the world doesn’t owe you a living. Rule 2, get your education and things will be good. No one can ever take that away from you. And, Rule 3, don’t do anything to embarrass your Mother. But I never had a vision of getting an education – which meant graduating from university – until Mr. Petresik came along.

The clock in Mr. Petresik’s English class, for no explainable reason, would go through a 20-second series of seemingly random ticking about two minutes prior to the bell ringing. As students, we waited for that ticking – a sure sign that class was soon to be over. But one day, in the middle of teaching something, obviously the bell got to Mr. Petresik. Clearly frustrated, he asked to no one in particular. “What is going on here? Does anyone know why that clock keeps ticking?”

I raised my hand and, like Kurt Vonnegut, I spun a story of aliens trying to contact us through electricity because they had seen our electric lines and thought they were dealing with a society who obviously communicated through electrical impulses. With the class in awe, probably not so much with the story as with the daring, I quite proudly spun the
story for approximately five minutes – until the bell rang. Mr. Petresik listened, looked at me oddly, and said: “Stay after class!”

Instead of admonishing me, he said: “I have been given the job of starting a school newspaper. That was one of the most creative things I have heard all year. You are going to write for the newspaper.” And, I did. In addition to creating humorous crossword puzzles that didn’t work, I wrote two regular columns. The first was “The Continuing Adventures of Loof Lirpa: Norway’s Great Explorer.” Loof Lirpa was April fool spelled backwards. My writing job was to take Loof all over the world, explaining his discoveries. It was pure and inane nonsense – where Loof discovered the Beach Boys and deconstructed their song lyrics; or where Loof introduced his merry sailors to bling; or Loof learns how to tie a granny knot to capture a crazed granny who was looting the coast of Denmark for knitting needles. Just spewed out creativity – and I always went for the cheap laugh or the gross out (I was a teenage boy, remember).

My second column was “Vivian’s Advice for the Lovelorn.” Here I wrote both the letters to Vivian, and Vivian’s responses. For example, a letter might ask: “Dear Vivian, my boyfriend and I get along really well, but he is so shy he talks to me only with sock puppets. Is this a problem?” signed Darlene. To which I would answer, “Dear Darlene, What color are the socks? It is important that an earnest young beau knows how to talk at both formal and informal occasions – especially to your parents,” signed Vivian.

Mr. Saires was a different kettle of fish altogether. He was the line coach of the football team, and serious about teaching English. I had him for grade 11. All year long, in addition to English literature, we parsed language. We had a coil bound book of two hundred pages of sentences and we went through it sentence by sentence, learning the parts of speech, when to use gerunds, the nature and uses of adverbial clauses, the difference between the meanings of subordinating conjunctions “while” and “although,” and in general learning everything one could ever know about grammar. I learned, but when I didn’t Mr. Saires was pretty accurate with erasers and I was always looking to duck. Together, this was a perfect pair for me. When grade 10’s creative, off-the-wall teacher was teamed with grade 11’s hard-driving grammarian, I could not have had a better formative education in writing. By grade 12, I had won a writing award and was taken, with other award winners, to New York’s St. Bonaventure University. As I sat there in this old Franciscan library, I remember proudly smelling the old books – just a bit south of musty – and thinking “I could like it here.” Even after my Father’s rule making, this was my first tangible vision of what going to university might be like – and it stuck.

Whenever I go back to Pennsylvania, which sadly is less often than I want, I try to stop by at least one of their houses and say hi and thanks. And, I encourage anyone who reads this to do likewise; if those teachers who influenced you positively are alive – go visit or write and say thanks!

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