

Teaching as a Sacred Activity

Michael P. Clough, Editor

Many years ago I received an e-mail from one of my students that directed me to a writing of Louis Schmier titled “Holiness in Teaching”. That piece, and many more of his inspirational writings regarding teaching, can be found at <http://www.halcyon.com/arborhts/rt/98nov27.htm>. Most of my former students have recognized my deep conviction that teaching is a very important undertaking. During the first fifteen or so years of my career they must have perceived this from the way I interacted with them and spoke about the responsibilities of teachers and schools, because I rarely stated explicitly that teaching is a sacred activity.

That changed almost a decade ago when I entered my 40’s and became far less concerned about what others might think of me if I openly spoke about the sacred nature of teaching. As I often say to my students, growing old does have some advantages. However, I do wonder why speaking of teaching as a sacred activity raises so many eyebrows. Perhaps this suspicious reaction reflects our contemporary culture’s overarching perspective that little, if anything, is sacred. Perhaps it reflects the low prestige (particularly at the university level) teaching unfortunately often receives.

No Child Left Behind has emphasized “scientifically based” education research, testing, and academic accountability, but it is silent on the moral aspects of education. That silence is deafening to those who see teaching as the sacred activity it can and should be. Research-based teacher decisions and practices are crucial for promoting among our students a deep understanding of science content and other equally important ends that characterize a well-educated individual. Those who have read my *ISTJ* editorials, attended my conference presentations and workshops or read my published work know that I always emphasize the importance of research-based teacher decision-making. However, these outlets can scarcely convey the sacred nature of teaching and the passion I have for helping children grow to be happy, ethical, and productive people. That worries me because without commitment to the philosophical and moral aspects of schooling, research-based teaching becomes mechanical and detached from children. Without attention to the sacred nature of teaching, teaching becomes simply a job.

I am not seeking to place blame, only to bring to the forefront what makes a meaningful education worth having, and the sacred nature of teaching that brings about that kind of education. Children are far more than future cogs in an economic machine, and the sacred nature of teaching is far more than putting into place research-based strategies. Neil Postman (1995) argued in *The End of Education* that economic productivity alone does not provide a compelling justification for education. Nor does it provide a compelling rationale for the commitment that is required for effective teaching. The philosophical and moral reasons for education, and the sacred nature of teaching, are what compel teachers to put in the enormous time and effort (for which they are often so unfairly paid) helping children grow to be all we want for them. Without that sacred perspective, little reason exists to learn and implement effective teaching practices — to engage children in truly meaningful education experiences rather than simply convey information to them.

Natalie Goldberg wrote that anything done fully is a journey alone. If that is true, it is only because so few people give fully of themselves. And yet, all of us have given our lives to become the person we now are. What we all wonder at times is whether we have lived fully, with purpose, and if what we have become is of any positive consequence to the world. When teachers give fully of themselves, as so many do, teaching is a sacred activity. Those teachers never have to wonder whether their life is significant.

Some will say that I take teaching too seriously. I don't think that is possible and believe each of us, with great effort, can make a significant positive difference in the lives of our students that will then spread well beyond our classroom, school and local community. I hope you believe that about yourself and all those you touch! That attitude is the beginning of seeing teaching as a sacred activity.

References

Postman, Neil (1995). *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. Vintage: New York.