

About Teaching and Teachers

Two Teachers of Letters

MARGARET TREECE METZGER, *Brookline High School,
Brookline, Massachusetts*

CLARE FOX, *Boston, Massachusetts*

In the face of parental pressure and with the lure of "high status" occupations, a prospective teacher seeks advice and insight from a former, favorite high school English instructor. Her question, "What does teaching mean to you?" brings a clarion reply: It is passion and paradox, love and hate, routine and excitement — and it always matters. After two years of teaching, the young teacher writes again, this time to say that she agrees — teaching does matter — but that she must leave it to try her hand at another career.

Spring 1984

Dear Mrs. Metzger,

I am writing to you as a former student who has just graduated from Brown University and who is considering teaching English next year. I remember you as a compelling and demanding teacher who seemed to enjoy her job. At the moment, you are the only person I know who would support my career choice. Almost everyone else is disparaging about teaching in public schools.

I am told that I didn't have to go to Brown University to become a teacher. I am told that teaching is a "wonderful thing to do until you decide what you really want to do with your life." I am told that it's "nice" that I'm going to be a teacher. Why does it seem that the decision to teach in our society is analogous with the decision to stunt one's growth, to opt out intellectually in favor of long summers off?

But teaching matters. I know that. You mattered to me, and other teachers have mattered to me. I enjoyed student teaching and I look forward to next year. I have imaginary dialogues with the students in my mind. I hear myself articulating my policy on borderline grades, explaining why I keep switching the chairs from circles to rows as I flounder in my efforts to decide what's best, or laughing with the students as I struggle to overcome saying "okay" too often when I lecture. But I wonder how much of teaching is actually an ego trip, a ploy to be liked, accepted, and respected by a group of people who have limited say in the matter. I also know the humiliation of a student's glare. I know there will be problems. Yet I cannot

deny the tremendous sense of worth I felt as a student teacher when students offered me their respect and when students worked hard and were proud of their effort.

I wonder where I would get this sense of worthwhileness if I were to work in a New York advertising firm or as an engineer at Bell Labs. And yet, going to work for a big corporation—whether an advertising firm, a bank, or a publishing house—impresses me. It would seem “real,” “grown-up,” as teaching never will. Nobody would tell me that being an engineer is “nice” or a wonderful way to figure out what I “really want to do.”

For graduation, my mother and sister gave me a beautiful, sleek attaché case. My reaction was twofold. First, I realized that it would never be large enough to carry the load of an English teacher, and second, I realized that, should I ever decide to leave teaching, it would be perfect for the real world of professional writers and young executives.

My mother doesn't want me to go into teaching. She is afraid I will get “stuck,” that my efforts will not be appreciated or rewarded, and that I will not meet men. When I called home from Minneapolis after a long, productive, and exhilarating day interviewing at schools, my mother congratulated me and suggested that I spend the evening putting together a second resumé—a writing resumé—before I forgot everything else I know how to do. She suggested I spend the following day visiting television studios scouting for writing jobs, “just in case.”

And my mother has been in public education for almost twenty years! Granted, when she entered Boston College in 1952, she had to choose between teaching and nursing. I, however, have chosen to teach from among many options available to me as a Brown graduate with a strong liberal arts degree.

I write to you, Mrs. Metzger, because you were the first person to excite me about the processes of writing and because your integrity in the classroom has long been an influence on me—and on my decision to teach. You mattered. I am turning to you because you are a professional; and you continue to choose teaching after eighteen years. I welcome any advice, comments, or solace you could offer me.

Sincerely,
Clare Fox

Spring 1984

Dear Clare,

I admire your courage to consider teaching. Your friends and relatives are not alone in their negative opinions about teaching. I'm sure you read the claim in the President's Commission on Education that education is a national disgrace. *Newsweek's* September 1984 cover showed a teacher in a dunce cap with the headline, “Why Teachers Fail—How to Make Them Better.” NBC ran a three-hour special on education—an exposé of inadequate schools. At least four blue-ribbon studies have concluded that teacher education is inadequate, that the pay is the lowest of all professions, that schools have deplorable management, and that the job is full of meaningless paperwork.

I know that much of the criticism is valid. However, the reports sensationalize and do not tell the whole truth. I appreciate your letter because you are giving me a chance to defend a profession I love.

Clare, I look forward to teaching. By mid-August I start planning lessons and dreaming about classrooms. I also wonder whether I'll have the energy to start again with new classes. Yet after September gets under way, I wake up in the morning expecting to have fun at work. I know that teaching well is a worthwhile use of my life. I know my work is significant.

I am almost forty years old, and I'm happier in my job than anyone I know. That's saying a lot. My husband, who enjoys his work, has routine days when he comes home and says, "Nothing much happened today—just meetings." I never have routine days. When I am in the classroom, I usually am having a wonderful time.

I also hate this job. In March I wanted to quit because of the relentlessness of dealing with one-hundred antsy adolescents day after day. I lose patience with adolescent issues: I think I'll screech if I have to listen to one more adolescent self-obsession. I'm physically exhausted every Friday. The filth in our school is an aesthetic insult. The unending petty politics drain me. Often I feel undermined on small issues by a school system that supports me well on academic freedom.

Like all jobs, teaching has inherent stresses. As you know from student teaching, you must know how to discipline a roomful of adolescents; you need to have a sense of purpose about what you are teaching; you need to cope with the exhaustion; and as an English teacher you must get the paper grading under control. I am always saddened by the number of excellent teachers who leave teaching because they think these difficult problems are unsolvable.

A curious irony exists. I am never bored at work, yet my days are shockingly routine. I can tell you exactly what I have done every school day for the past eighteen years at 10:15 in the morning (homeroom attendance), and I suspect I will do the same for the next twenty years. The structure of the school day has changed little since education moved out of the one-room schoolhouse. All teachers get tired of the monotonous routine of bookkeeping, make-up assignments, twenty-minute lunches, and study hall duties. I identify with J. Alfred Prufrock when he says, "I have measured out my life with coffee spoons." My own life has been measured out in student papers. At a conservative estimate I've graded over 30,000—a mind-boggling statistic which makes me feel like a very dull person indeed.

The monotony of my schedule is mirrored in the monotony of my paycheck. No matter how well or poorly I teach, I will be paid the same amount. There is absolutely no monetary reward for good job performance, or any recognition of professional growth or acquired expertise. My pay depends on how long I've taught and my level of education. I work in a school district in which I cannot afford to live. I am alternatively sad and angry about my pay. To the outside world it seems that I am doing exactly the same job I did in 1966—same title, same working conditions, same pay scale (except that my buying power is 8 percent less than it was when I earned \$5,400 on my first job). To most people I am "just a teacher."

But this is the outside reality. The interior world of the teacher is quite different. Although you have to come to some terms with the outward flatness of the career, I want to assure you that teachers change and grow. So little research has been done on stage development of teachers that the literature recognizes only three categories—intern, novice, and veteran. This is laughably over-simplified. There is

life after student teaching; there is growth after the first year. You will some day solve many of the problems that seem insurmountable during your exhilarating student teaching and your debilitating first year.

Sometimes I am aware of my growth as a teacher, and I realize that finally, after all these years, I am confident in the classroom. On the very, very best days, when classes sing, I am able to operate on many levels during a single class: I integrate logistics, pedagogy, curriculum, group dynamics, individual needs, and my own philosophy. I feel generous and good-natured towards my students, and I am challenged by classroom issues. But on bad days, I feel like a total failure. Students attack my most vulnerable points. I feel overwhelmed by paperwork. I ache from exhaustion. I dream about going to Aruba, but I go to the next class.

I keep going because I'm intellectually stimulated. I enjoy literature, and I assign books I love and books I want to read. I expect class discussions and student papers to give me new insights into literature. As you may remember, I tell students that in exchange for my hard work, they should keep me interested and they should teach me. They do.

To me, teaching poses questions worthy of a lifetime of thought. I want to think about what the great writers are saying. I want to think about how people learn. I want to think about the values we are passing on to the next generation. I am particularly interested in teaching thinking. I love to teach writing. I am working now on teaching writing as a tool for thinking. Questions about teaching are like puzzles to me; I can spend hours theorizing and then use my classroom as a laboratory.

I am also intellectually challenged by pedagogical problems. I have learned to follow the bizarre questions or the "wrong answers." Some questions reveal chasms of ignorance. For example, "Where is Jesus' body?" or "Before movies were in color, wasn't the world dull just being in black and white?" Sometimes students make shocking statements which demand careful responses: "All athletic girls are lesbians" or "Sexually abused toddlers probably really enjoy the sex." And every year, new students require new teaching skills—Cambodian boat children who have never been in school and are illiterate even in their own language, or handicapped children such as a deaf Israeli girl who is trying to learn English without being able to hear it.

And then there are all the difficult, "normal" situations: students and parents who are "entitled," hostile, emotionally needy, or indifferent; students who live in chaotic homes, who are academically pressured, who have serious drug and alcohol problems. The list goes on and on. No school of education prepared me for the "Hill Street Blues" intensity and chaos of public schools. I received my combat training from other teachers, from myself, and mostly from the students. You will too.

Sometimes I think I can't do it all. I don't want to be bitter or a martyr, so I am careful to take care of myself. I put flowers on my desk to offset the dreariness of an old school building. I leave school several times a week to run errands or to take walks in order to feel less trapped. Other teachers take courses at local colleges, join committees of adults, talk in the teacher's lounge, or play with computers. In order to give to others, teachers must nurture themselves.

Ultimately, teaching is nurturing. The teacher enters a giving relationship with strangers, and then the teacher's needs must give way to students' needs. I want to work on my own writing; instead I work on students' writing. My days are spent encouraging young people's growth. I watch my students move beyond me, think-

ing and writing better than I have ever done. I send them to colleges I could never afford. And I must strive to be proud, not jealous, of them. I must learn generosity of heart.

I am a more compassionate person because I have known teachers and students. I think differently about handicaps because I worked with Guy, who is quadriplegic from a rugby accident. Refugee problems have a human face because I've heard Nazmul tell stories about refugee camps in Bangladesh, and I've heard Merhdad tell about escaping from Iran, hidden in a camel's baggage. I have seen the school social worker give suicidal students his home phone number, telling them to call anytime. I have seen administrators bend all the rules to help individual students through personal crises. Every day I hear stories of courage and generosity. I admire other teachers.

Facing every new class is an act of courage and optimism. Years ago, the courage required was fairly primitive. I needed courage to discipline my classes, to get them into line, to motivate them to work. But now I need a deeper courage. I look at each new class and know that I must let each of these young people into my life in some significant way. The issue is one of heart. Can I open my heart to two hundred more adolescent strangers each year? Put bluntly, can I be that loving?

I hope to love my students so well that it doesn't even matter whether they like me. I want to love them in the way I love my own son—full of respect and awe for who they are, full of wanting their growth, full of wonder at what it means to lead and to follow the next generation.

Clare, when you consider a life's work, consider not just what you will take to the task, but what it will give to you. Which job will give self-respect and challenge? Which job will give you a world of ideas? Which job will be intellectually challenging? Which job will enlarge you and give you life in abundance? Which job will teach you lessons of the heart?

With deep respect,
Margaret Metzger

Spring 1986

Dear Mrs. Metzger,

After two years of teaching, I still derive strength and vigor from the letter you wrote me so long ago. Your letter makes me remember all of the best parts of teaching—the self-evaluations written by students who liked their work and the silliness of the class that plotted ways to walk out on me, knowing I would catch up with them and we'd resume class wherever we were—the library, another classroom, the basketball court. I remember lots of laughing. I laugh a lot in the classroom, more than I do in my private life.

And I think a lot, too. There is no better way to learn a book than to teach it, no better way to think through a writing problem than to wrestle through the drafts of a paper, guiding the writer beyond frustration to resolution. I am at my brightest, some moments, in the classroom.

And yet I have decided to leave teaching.

I am feeling too selfish to teach, too possessive of my time and my future. I have decided to work full-time at the publishing company where I have worked afternoons this year, where I work on my own writing with others coaching me, and where my writing is printed, a thousandfold and over. I will earn almost \$5,000 less than I would if I taught full-time next year, and I will work all summer with few vacations.

After a strong, satisfying year I left my first teaching job in June because I was afraid of the cycle that had already been established. I taught six classes a day—five writing and one advanced reading—to seventh graders. I taught at an exceptionally demanding, academically rigorous junior high. By February I was exhausted, and by June I had made two friends outside of teaching. Too much of my time outside of school had been spent on papers, or in the library looking for good reasons to teach *Alice in Wonderland*. I spent a lot of time with other teachers from the school—a smart, professional, and fun group of people. But still we talked about school—and our shared exhaustion.

After living for Memorial Day weekend, I found myself with no plans. I realized how completely I'd been absorbed by my job. I also saw myself years from now, a good teacher—better than I am now—but still without plans for a holiday weekend. And each year the kids would move on.

Yet for all my martyrdom, I have never once felt caught up. I have never passed back a set of papers without wondering whom I had disappointed, who had counted on my intuitions and my goodness and not just my editorial skills. And I am only teaching part-time this year—juniors in high school. There is no room for complacency in the classroom; we are forever judged and measured. No matter how achingly we want to do it right, there is always something that could be done better. I could know more about Fitzgerald before I introduce *The Great Gatsby*; I could be more responsive to student needs if I gave up my lunch hour every day. And yet I could struggle for hours over the perfect comment for a student's paper, or the best approach to a piece of literature, and still not know which sentence the student would walk away with.

I hope to teach again some day, when I have more in my life and other investments to balance with teaching. I would like to combine my teaching skills with my own writing, perhaps by coordinating a writing program or working with other teachers to promote writing across the curriculum.

In my heart I think I'll be back. And I think I'll be a better teacher for having stepped out and indulged my selfishness.

Thank you for your support. You have been very important to me.

Sincerely,
Clare Fox

Harvard Educational Review

8 Story Street, 1st Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138 USA\
HER_manuscripts@gse.harvard.edu | www.harvardeducationalreview.org

This is the definitive publisher-authenticated version of the following article:
Margaret Treece Metzger and Clare Fox, “Two Teachers of Letters,” *Harvard Educational Review*, volume 56n4 (November 1986) pp 349-354.

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