Learning as devotional practice: the role of the teacher

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Abstract

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This article develops the pedagogic literature on the importance of the relationship between teachers and learners. In a good classroom relation, teachers are also learners and learners are also teachers: it is the relationship that does the work. As the literature shows, love is the main characteristic of this relationship, important because it suspends the subjective states that privilege self-certainty over learning. We will take this insight further by showing that this love takes the classroom form of devotional practice. This practice, classically described in monastic traditions, allows learners to give up the finite self and be open to infinite possibilities they share through their relations. Teachers establish such practices by their vocational surrender to them. Good teachers are good not because they have mastered knowledge and the classroom, but because they are themselves devoted to the learning process. This chapter will take the example of the relation of one teacher-and-student to draw out the principles that apply to all pedagogical practice. It will highlight the wholism of practice which brings together heart, head and hand.

Learning as devotional practice: the role of the teacher

When people talk of the teachers who have had most effect on their lives, their tone is inflected with a sense of awe. Such teachers seem larger than life and people often assume that all the good things that happened in the class were planned and brought about by the teacher. But this is not how teachers experience the classroom. Because they are in awe of the process of education, teachers participate in the process with humility, knowing that they are not in control of what happens.

A longstanding theoretical tradition emphasises that teaching is a relationship. There is no teacher without a student, and vice versa. This is not simply to say that two terms are necessary to teaching and learning, but rather that teacher and student are implicated in each other. In a good classroom relation, teachers are also learners and learners are also teachers. It is the relationship that does the work: it is *teaching* that is powerful, not *teachers*. In a teaching and learning relationship, learning occurs through an ontological transformation, as participants suspend their identities as teacher or learner and become the embodiment of relationship. It is because students are part of this awesome

process that they find themselves inspired to learn (eg, Liston, 2000, 2004, 2008; Palmer 1983, 1998; Blumenfeld-Jones, 2004; Noddings, 1984; Goldstein, 1999; Gaita, 2001).

As the literature shows, agapic love is the main characteristic of this relationship, important because it suspends the subjective states that privilege self-certainty over learning. We will take this insight further by showing that this love takes the classroom form of devotional practice. Classically described in monastic traditions, this practice is not a constraint but a discipline of openness. It provides a supportive environment that allows learners to give up their identities and be open to the surprise and potential offered by the classroom community. Good teachers are good not because they have mastered knowledge and the classroom, but because, being themselves devoted to the learning process, they are available to respond to what the process calls for. In other words, teachers establish such practices by their vocational surrender to them.

This chapter takes a case study from our research on *Teachers Who Change Lives* to show the importance of devotional practice (Metcalfe and Game 2006). We argue that education that centres on the self alienates learners from the potential of the classroom and the world. A symptom of this alienation is the

Cartesian splitting of head and hand. Devotional practice brings together heart, head and hand, through a learning process based on participation rather than self-conscious mastery.

Love in the classroom

Like Noddings (1984), we base our understanding of love on Martin Buber's account of ethics, distinguishing the 'inclusive Eros' of love (Buber, 2002, 114) from the 'lame-winged Eros' (2002, 34) of desire. Buber uses the term 'I-It' to describe the desirous logic of finite subjects and objects, and the term 'I-You' (sometimes translated as 'I-Thou') to describe relations based on love and infinitude. He insists that love is not personal, not a feeling or desire of one subject for another, but is instead a relational state. More particularly, love is the quality of the I-You relation that arises without anyone bringing it about:

> Feelings are 'entertained': love comes to pass. Feelings dwell in man; but man dwells in his love. That is no metaphor, but the actual truth. Love does not cling to the *I* in such a way as to have the *Thou* only for its 'content', its object; but love is *between I* and *Thou*. The man who does not know this, with his very being know this, does not know love… . Good people and evil, wise

> and foolish, beautiful and ugly, become successively real to him [who takes his stand in love]; that is, set free they step forth in their singleness, and confront him as *Thou.* … Love is responsibility of an *I* for a *Thou.*' (1958, 14-15)

When in an I-It relation, Buber as a subject can see an object, and he can admire or desire it, or classify it as a species, or see it as an example of a scientific law, or turn it into a number, but in all of these cases it 'remains my object, occupies space and time' (1958, 7). According to Buber, however, it can 'also come about' that the I becomes 'bound up in relation to' what may have seemed an object (1958, 7). This relation, the I-You relation, allows a direct meeting that involves neither subject nor object. Though the meeting does not negate species or law or number, no definition of characteristics can now exhaust the uniqueness and wholeness of this presence. There is seeing, in the I-You relation, but no identifiably distinct see-er or seen. The I-You sees no *thing*, and this nothingness is not lack but infinitude. Moreover this infinitude is not the arithmetic sense of endless addition but is an undefinable wholeness that is here and now, present in the meeting:

> When *Thou* is spoken, the speaker has no thing for his object.… *Thou* has no bounds.…
>
> The relation to the *Thou* is direct. No system of ideas, no foreknowledge, and no fancy intervene between *I* and *Thou*.… No aim, no lust, and no anticipation intervene between *I* and *Thou*.…
>
> (1958, 4, 11)

This passage clarifies what Buber means when he says that love and the I-You relation allow people to be seen 'in their singleness'. He is not referring to individuality but to uniqueness and incomparability, which include but are not exhausted by any classification. Incomparability is not finite, or identifiable, or oneness, but is only experienced through direct encounter. Buber puts it this way: 'Inseparable, incomparable, irreducible, now, happening once only, [my concrete world reality] gazes upon me with an awesome look' (1966, 22). But, of course, this is epiphany, a non-directional vision, and not the gaze of a subject onto an external world.

If the You is no-thing, Buber's I-You cannot be intersubjective, a meeting of subjects, or the space *between* subjects, as many educational theorists assume (eg. Sidorkin, 1996). When the speaker 'has no thing for their object', they cannot

be a subject, because they lack the mirroring that would turn them into one. They too are no-thing, open in an accepting unintegrated state where there is both difference and stillness. In the meeting, participants have lost their *selves*, but have found *being*, as parts of a whole, where every part is vitally and necessarily different but where each is the germ of the whole. They are, in Merleau-Ponty's phrase, different possibilities in the whole of Being (1968, 270).

The subjectlessness of Buber's I-You relation is based on its desirelessness ('no aim, no lust, and no anticipation'). Meeting is an acceptance of *whatever* is given by the world in the particularity of an encounter. As Buber says 'The *Thou* meets me through grace – it is not found by seeking' (1958, 11). Unlike the world projected by desire, the relational world of acceptance has 'the simplicity of fullness' (2002, 34-5). This fullness isn't satiation, but is an emptiness; it is a sense of acceptance and connection, of gift and grace, that suspends the restless time of desire. When love is understood as a person's emotion, it is seen as a source of subjective bias. But from Buber's perspective, love suspends the sentimentality of personal attachments and allows us to meet the world as it is, unique, irreducible, here, now.

Learning based on agapic love, then, unlike learning based on desire, can never be a mastery of difference. Thus we find Gaita echoing Buber when he talks of love's cognitive work:

> Iris Murdoch said that understanding the reality of another person is a work of love, justice and pity. She meant, I think, that love, justice and pity are *forms* of understanding, rather than merely conditions which facilitate understanding - conditions like a clear head, a good night's sleep, an alcohol-free brain. Real love is hardheaded and unsentimental. When one rids oneself of sentimentality, pathos and similar failings, one allows justice, love and pity to do their *cognitive* work, their work of disclosing reality. Sometimes the full reality of another human being is visible only to love (2001).

Liston draws a similar point from Murdoch when he argues that the teacher's love is one that 'takes the individual beyond his or her personal concerns to a clearer, less noise-filled focus on beauty … and on the world around and beyond us' (2000, 95). Love allows teachers to accept uncertainty with humility and to attend to the reality of the learning situation before them, in the here and now, without anticipation. This patient and attentive state is essential if

teachers are to play their part in helping students engage with the larger world and find those connections with their lives that show 'that significance exists' (Liston, 2000, 81).

What Gaita and Liston learn from Murdoch is that teaching requires the non-subjective ontological state that is the basis of all creative work (see Williams, 2005a). Borrowing from Simone Weil, Murdoch calls this state 'attention', claiming that it is the basis of a moral life and pointing out that its ontology undermines the dichotomy of freedom *or* determinism (1970, 34-7): 'If I attend properly I will have no choices…. The idea of a patient, loving regard, directed upon a person, a thing, a situation, presents the will not as unimpeded movement but as something very much more like "obedience"' (1970, 40; see also Weil, 2002, Arendt, 1970, 45; Liston, 2004, 2008; Palmer 1983; Van Manen, 2000; Quinteros, 2004). Attention is a form of love that requires ontological, spatial and temporal transformation.

Murdoch is not offering a model of a moral life, any more than Liston is offering a model of the good teacher: there is no abstract model to follow, and no state that can be achieved by a worthy subject (see also Noddings, 1984). Goodness, Murdoch says, has the quality of 'naked' 'for-nothingness' (1970,

92); it is not produced by a willfully virtuous subject but by open relations, by open response to the particularities of a given, and therefore gratuitous, situation:

> The chief enemy of excellence… is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one. Rilke said of Cézanne that he did not paint 'I like it', he painted 'There it is'. This is not easy and requires… a discipline.… We cease to be in order to attend to the order of something else. (Murdoch, 1970, 59)

What this discussion suggests, therefore, is that love is not a desire or personal feeling that we entertain, not something that can be found through seeking, but is a relational form through which particularity, vitality and significance emerge. Moreover, love has an authority that commands attention and ascetic obedience. This is not a demand coming from a Euclidean outside and it is not received by a subject. It is a command which comes from no identifiable one, and no identifiable location, and which travels no where and to no one.

Nevertheless, it is a command in which previously unrecognized needs are immediately recognized.

Monastic practice

From the perspective of subjective ontology, obedience and asceticism are ways of denying or negating difference (see, for example, Foucault, 1980). A brief consideration of monastic traditions, however, will allow us to develop the alternative relational claim that obedience is a form of love, which, as Buber and Murdoch imply, involves attention to difference. Monastic practices across traditions are based on the understanding that certain forms of discipline prepare people to accept love, and thereby accept the world as it really is. The principle of difference, according to Jamison, for example, is the very heart of monastic practice (2006, 84-5).

As monastic writers frequently observe, the etymology of the word obedience refers to an attentive listening, a loving listening that allows awareness of what is *really* happening (e.g. Jamison, 2006, 76-7). This is associated with another general monastic principle, that the role of ascetic discipline is to still desire, thereby transforming the practitioner so that they are open and available to the world, able to obey with love and without subjection. Such discipline allows

attention to the world without the distractions of personal fantasy. It is an affirmation of life, rather than a negation. Devoted to a life that is more and other than one's own, ascetic discipline allows differences to emerge that could not have been anticipated or brought about by the desirous subject (see Williams, 2005b, 46; Williams, 2005a, 147).

To still the desires that obstruct acceptance, monastic practice insists on the importance of a spatial discipline that holds the practitioner in the non-Euclidean here. The practical advice from one of the most famous sayings of the desert fathers was 'Sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything' (quoted in Williams, 2005b, 95). Everything and everywhere (and no-thing and nowhere) are here.

Furthermore, spatial discipline is matched by a temporal discipline. The bell that orders the monk's day as a daily round gently frustrates heroic desire. It allows the practitioner to learn to wait with humility, in the knowledge that it is the practice that does the work (Norris, 1999, 377). As Steindl-Rast puts it, 'We learn in the monastery to savor our work as we are doing it – doing it for its own sake, not just doing it to have it done, or to get over with. We need to resist our tendency to rush into things and to hurry through our activities' (Steindl-Rast with Lebell, 1998, 50; see also Nhat Hanh, 1995, 23). The

repetition of the monk's day opens onto difference because, not structured around ends, devotional practice allows monks to be in the non-linear present, the time where life unfolds. Far from being a deadening experience of seriality, such repetition is enlivening: attention can be given to the new and surprising because the present hasn't been reduced to a series of steps toward an end.

This insistence on the importance of the here and now gets to the heart of the most common misunderstanding of monastic practice. It is not a discipline designed to overcome the real and worldly, to rise to a spiritual plane that is above the physical and the mundane; it is, instead, a discipline to allow acceptance of the wholeness that is already offered, in the here and now. What matters, what is meaningful, is never elsewhere. It is found in love and respect for what really is. 'It is enough to be,' says Thomas Merton,

> in an ordinary human mode, with only hunger and sleep, one's cold and warmth; rising and going to bed. Putting on blankets and taking them off (two last night – it is cold for June!) Making coffee and then drinking it. Defrosting the refrigerator, reading, meditating, working (ought to get on to the article on symbolism today), praying. I live as my fathers have lived on this earth until eventually I die. Amen. There is no need to make an assertion of my life, especially to assert it as MINE, though it is doubtless not somebody else's. (quoted in Griffin, 1993, 26)

Meaning and understanding, then, are found as much in the manual work of making coffee as in the comprehension of liturgy. Moreover, the latter is not, in monastic practice, classified as a mental task. Thich Nhat Hanh observed that there are disrespectful and reverent ways to drink a cup of tea (see King, 2001: 152); likewise, the monk's experience of reading the Bible depends on how respectfully they turn its pages. Hand, heart and head are implicated in each other, parts of a whole. Devotion to humble and apparently pointless practice connects people with their whole being as it connects them with the world. Devotional practice brings people into the present, changing them so that they are receptive to the world and joyously grateful for the part they are called to play in it.

Teacher and student

To develop an understanding of love and devoted attention in the classroom, we will draw material from a research project for which we interviewed well-known Australians and a wide range of teachers. We invited all interviewees to talk about their experiences of life-changing teachers, and the teachers to talk about their own teaching practices and experiences. Our research showed that elements of monastic practice were common to good teaching, even though

few teachers or students showed any recognition of the connection between classroom practices and devotional practice.

One of the students we interviewed was Nick Jose. Nick went to school in Adelaide in the 1950s and 1960s. He has been a diplomat in China, and is a novelist, critic and Professor of Creative Writing. Most recently, he has edited the authoritative *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*. Nick nominated his English teacher, Mr Schubert, as the teacher who changed his life. While Nick went to an exclusive Anglican school that modeled itself on the English public school, Mr Schubert was from a German background. Although Mr Schubert taught at the school for forty three years, was the head teacher of English and became deputy headmaster, Nick sensed 'some level of insecurity in him' because he was 'different', 'essentially an outsider in that school'. Nick thought that this difference gave Mr Schubert a cultural sensitivity that allowed him to broaden students' perspectives.

Mr Schubert had died before our study, but we were shown letters that he wrote to Nick and to another student from the same time. The teaching-learning relation described in this material highlights the importance of ascetic and devotional practices in the ordinary classroom. Although Mr Schubert's main field was English literature, our interviews with a broad range of teachers

revealed that the same practices are found in, for example, music lessons, maths classes, sports coaching, homework routines and general codes of conduct.

Here, first, is Nick's description of Mr Schubert.

> What the teacher does is in the here and now, that's where it happens, and then there is this distant harvest, which they have to just trust in. Teachers can't predict exactly what will happen. Their work is an act of faith. Even if the teacher knows what students become, they know always another part of them. So they have quite a rounded sense of what people are, that there are always going to be other aspects to them. They know that, despite social standing and success, there are always other measures of value. Being an outsider himself [a German in Australia, twenty years after the second world war] helped Mr Schubert see that.
>
> I learned to read literature from Mr Schubert. Although my practice has changed, that chord is still there. I think I'm incredibly lucky to have had such a good teacher. He was quite an imposing figure, partly because he was such a senior teacher, partly because he had the English and the German, that was another layer of learning. He was sort of upright and

solid, and he was quite sharp in his rebukes of people who were not taking their work seriously. He also had a very distinctive croaky voice -- we called him Frog Schubert -- and a very big nose. He was almost a Gothic figure; one had a lot of respect for him, combined with a certain fear. He was quite a tough teacher, but very, very good.

Mr Schubert had a really deep love of literature. The texts he chose for us were fantastic texts he had a passion for, and, however strange his manner, he was able to convey that passion. He was very sensitive to literature and was always challenging us boys to be responsive as well. He was challenging us to tap into quite powerful forces in our lives, and that was a way of letting us be ourselves.

He seemed blissfully unaware of the effect he was having on us. He'd read out these bits, like the quote from *Othello* - 'an old black ram … tupping your white ewe'. It was electrifying! Because he was blissfully unaware, we thought it was okay too. He treated us absolutely as if we were mature people intellectually. There was no talking down, and so that does lead to a kind of mutual respect.

> As 16 year old boys, we found it incredibly difficult to express what we had inside. If Mr Schubert had been too intimate with us or too informal, I think we would have found it crippling. But by having this formal structure, it allowed us to get past our reserve; if we thought we were doing academic work, we could write about a love poem without becoming paralysed.

> I learned [from Mr Schubert] a way of reading that was close, sensuous, and very precise. This subtle way of responding is what I still use when reviewing something or writing something myself. I feel quite confident in my method; I can trust my responses and I can articulate them. I don't need to try too hard, but just do it naturally as I've been taught. I know it will work: I proved that to myself with Mr Schubert, who wouldn't let me get away with showing off. When showing off, you're interposing your own bright ideas, rather than letting your responses come from the text.

Mr Schubert gave an idea of his teaching practice in a reply to a letter from a grateful student:

How thoughtful of you to guess what a letter like yours, coming out of the blue as it did, would mean to a teacher like me. A teacher's work can properly be judged only by its long-term outcome, of which, in the nature of things, he can normally expect to know little or nothing: he works, as it were, largely in the dark.

Additionally, there is the question of what criterion it is appropriate to use. Recently, at a dinner at the School, I sat between [A], who was still plainly excited by being newly appointed a judge of the Supreme Court, and [B], who makes no bones about his satisfaction with his role in shaping the policies of the Reserve Bank. But, perversely perhaps, I am even more impressed by [C], who tells me he still always has his Donne on his bedside table, or [D], who claims that he reads more poetry than anything else.

In a letter to Nick, Mr Schubert wrote:

No lesson in which I didn't learn as much as my class was of any value. To me teaching something was by far the best way of learning it. Now often I found that my knowledge of a work which I had long been

familiar with was only a glib one. And certainly a class would find you out. No amount of study, of course would unravel *Lycidas* or *The Ancient Mariner*, but all that was essential was the plain evidence that you had grappled with it. I also fancy a teacher is fortunate above most because he has the privilege of encountering so many minds vastly superior to his own. Together they can engage in that one essential pursuit of man – endlessly to seek out the truth. As Donne puts it *On a huge hill, Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will* Reach *her, about must, and about must goe.* Except for those blinding moments which fire you to continue the search, there is, of course, no hope of ever attaining your goal. And beware of that man who claims he has done so. But, as I see it, nothing exonerates one from this unrelenting task.

And now you have become a writer – lucky you. I suppose the problem is how to make the language of the tribe, which is the only one available to you ('What no-one with us shares, scarce seems our own'), the medium of your own unique individuality. What fascinates me are the interstices of language, the meaning that pulsates between the words, the saying of what is not being said, of what cannot be said, of what is unsayable.

> We'll have to forgive you what is surely only a momentary heresy – 'The world may not need another book' you say. But, as you well know, of course it does – if for no other reason than because it's a different world from what it was a moment ago, and with the passing of that moment, the whole past has shifted, so that Dante, for example, now means something else than he did before.

The teacher's devotion

Nick describes Mr. Schubert as passionate, but this should not be taken as a desirous state. Passion is not a seeking but an acceptance of *a really deep love*, a condition that is suffered. Whereas desire is exclusive, directed toward an object, Mr Schubert's classroom was characterized by an inclusive love, not attached to any thing or any one. It seems, for example, that Mr Schubert was devoted to poets, to students, to teaching, to truth, to literature and to the world, all of which were part of a whole. There was no choice in this love, and he served any one of these parts by serving the others. And because he didn't compartmentalize his life, his students didn't need to either. Nick seems to have loved school, to have loved learning, to have loved Mr Schubert, to have loved *Othello*. Each part held the whole.

Mr. Schubert, we will argue, could prepare for and protect openness to difference because his work arose from the undefined qualities of love and vocation. If there was no object of his love, there was also no subject: he didn't need to interpose his personal ends because he embodied the process itself. We will see that Nick trusted Mr Schubert's analytic practice because it was consistent with his responsive teaching practice. Nick is alluding to this openness when he says that the teacher's work is *an act of faith* and *in the here and now*. Although Nick imagines that there is a *distant harvest*, Mr Schubert insists that the teacher remains *in the dark*, that there is no future and no *criterion* of success which will vindicate their identity as teacher. He taught as he did because it was good in itself (*there is, of course, no hope of ever attaining your goal. And beware of that man who claims he has done so. But, as I see it, nothing exonerates one from this unrelenting task*).

That Mr Schubert worked *in the dark* is an indication of his ability to live with uncertainty, without defences. Nick felt that in some situations in the school, Mr Schubert as outsider had to 'tough it out', but we'll argue that he found sanctuary in the social relations of the classroom. When Nick described Mr

Schubert as *blissfully unaware of the effect he was having on us*, he was highlighting the unself-consciousness of Mr Schubert's engagement in the classroom. It was this authenticity, and the lack of the ulterior motive of a (personal) project, which made Mr Schubert trustworthy. Mr. Schubert taught, not by saying what he knew, but by manifesting his love of learning. (*No lesson in which I didn't learn as much as my class was of any value. To me teaching something was by far the best way of learning it.*) There was teaching and learning in this classroom but no-one could have said who was doing what.

Teaching like this requires courage, for teachers must live openly, aware of the 'fakeness' of self-justification and the projection of goals (Murdoch, 1970, 59). For example, it is likely that, in I-It mode, Mr Schubert 'entertained' a range of hopes for his students (c.f. Buber, 1958, 14). He might have hoped that they would be successful in their careers, that they would serve others, that they would be sustained by their relationships with books, but he also recognized these hopes as projections distracting him from the reality of the present (*there is the question of what criterion it is appropriate to use)*. With ascetic devotion, his classes accepted tomorrow as the unfolding of today, having faith that tomorrow would fulfill today in a way that no one today could have expected (see Hillman, 1978).

To take another example, it is possible that Mr Schubert was sometimes tempted to abrogate the students' learning process by giving a conclusive reading of Donne. His awareness of the class, however, would have alerted him to the inauthenticity in his voice, and thereby warned him that he was talking to himself rather than obeying, or listening intently to, the students. In other words, this awareness of his desires and fears would have returned him to where he needed to be, taking him from subjectivity back to relation. Awareness gives patience, openness and faith, that 'clearer, less noise-filled focus on beauty …. and on the world around and beyond us' of which Liston speaks.

When a teacher like Mr. Schubert devotes himself to practice, he finds that the practice supports him as well as supporting the students. The practice allowed Mr. Schubert to let students teach him where his class had to go, and this openness to learning allowed him to teach year after year and class after class without feeling boredom in the repetition (see Bachelard, 1969, xxviii-xxix). This is the classroom experience that Mr Schubert was referring to when he reminded a temporarily blasé Nick *that it's a different world from what it was a*

moment ago, and with the passing of that moment, the whole past has shifted, so that Dante, for example, now means something else than he did before.

Mr Schubert's practice was based on the recognition that wonder and newness emerge from repetition. Repetitive routine is not mechanical and not a repetition of the past, because, through devotion to practice, past, present and future co-exist in the unfolding now. As Mr Schubert suggests in his use of the present tense (*Dante, for example, now means something else than he did before*), the round of practice involves a bringing to life of origins. Dante is miraculously alive, a real presence (Steiner, 1989; Shotter, 2003). This is not simply to say that the Dante of the past has been brought to life in a modern representation; this is not the Dante of the biographer or historian. Instead, Mr Schubert is saying that Dante *is*. The 'miracle' is knowing Dante in his essence or beingness, a non-finite emptiness that allows Mr Schubert and his students to participate without exclusion or reserve.

Learning through devotional practice

Obedience to Mr Schubert's trustworthy practices protected Nick from the desirous preoccupation with goals. Speaking of the practice he learned from Mr. Schubert, he says *I feel quite confident in my method; I don't need to try too hard*. If he worked honestly, the practice would take him where he needed to go. Mr Schubert discouraged the vanity of cleverness. As Nick puts it: *When showing off, you're interposing your own bright ideas, rather than letting your responses come from the text.* When Mr Schubert refused to be impressed by showing off, he was respecting the unique potential of each student, which would have been lost if students approached their work with the desire to create favourable self-images.

When Nick describes Mr Schubert as *upright and solid*, he is referring to the quality that allowed students to feel safe in accepting difference. Because of their unquestioning confidence in his practice, Mr Schubert's students could focus on the task before them, which then could 'fill the heavens' (Buber, 1958, 8). When they were reading poetry, *that* was what they were doing. The stillness of this discipline made the classroom a sanctuary in students' lives. In this environment, thoughts came to them that would have eluded the thinking of a narrowly desirous mind: because they were open, a vast range of connections opened up.

If Mr Schubert protected the students, it was nonetheless clear that his devotion was to the students' potential and not to their pride. Mr Schubert *was quite sharp in his rebukes of people who were not taking their work seriously*. By witnessing students so that they became aware of their self-consolations, he taught them how to stay in relation with the world, how to live with the apparent uncertainty of openness, how to become aware of the unlively feeling involved in predictable or blasé responses. Mr Schubert was fulfilling this role as witness when he gently rebuked Nick for the vanity that was hidden beneath his attitude to writing a second book. While this role ensured that Mr Schubert's classes disconcerted students, and that he was an *imposing* and somewhat fearsome presence, this straightforward honesty was in fact a crucial part of his trustworthiness. Students didn't need to take his searching questions personally, because the questions didn't reflect his personal opinions and favoritisms; his questions arose from a love that clearly included students.

The logic of this supportive environment is often misunderstood. People assume that creative learning involves personal expression, but encouragement of subjectivity makes people too self-conscious to learn. On the contrary, it is an interested impersonality that allows students to truthfully explore the aspects of their lives that cannot be contained by identity (see Murdoch, 1970, 65). By setting aside their desires and serving the needs of the class dialogue, students

see the world in new ways. The difference they notice in the world teaches them of their difference to their own identity. They learn about the world as they learn their own potential.

Nick highlighted this point when he insisted that it was the academic rigour and formality of Mr Schubert's classes that allowed the boys to unreservedly engage with the poems. Nick's analyses of love poems resonated with his life, but he was never required to define himself in the writing process. He could hold open possibilities, in himself and in the poetry. Because he and the poem knew each other directly, as *I* knows *You*, they knew more than to reach conclusions about each other. Likewise, although Nick was fully engaged in his work, its formality helped him avoid becoming personally identified with it. Far from enforcing uniformity, classroom formality was a guarantee that Nick's difference would be respected. He could be open without fear that others would be over-familiar.

When we think of this interested impersonality at work in Mr Schubert's loving use of quotation, we can see that impersonal does not imply abstract or heartless or disembodied. Mr Schubert knew his beloved poets by heart, which means that they were those who best knew his heart (*'What no-one with us shares, scarce seems our own'*). Their words came to him when needed, and he trusted

them to guide him. Not for him the approach to literature that retreats from the wildness of the words themselves (*craggy and steep*), back into the predictability of crib note and showy interpretation (*What fascinates me [is] … the meaning that pulsates between the words, the saying … of what is unsayable.*). For Mr Schubert, as for George Steiner, reading is a devotional practice of hospitality, of welcoming the text into your being and allowing it to change you and find its way to your tongue. As Steiner put it, criticizing the fashionable rejection in secondary schools of 'learning by heart', the reader or listener

> can become an executant of felt meaning when he learns the poem or musical passage by heart. To learn by heart is to afford the text or music an indwelling clarity and life-force…. What we know by heart becomes an agency in our consciousness, a 'pace-maker' in the growth and vital complication of our identity…. [generating] a shaping reciprocity between ourselves and that which the heart knows. (1989, 9)

Imagine the (*electrifying)* effect of Mr Schubert, in his *distinctively croaky* way, and with his German accent, giving unselfconscious voice to Donne or Shakespeare. Imagine the students revelling in the mystery and sonority of the words, feeling meaning that they can not yet explain, *tapping into quite powerful forces in their lives*, unsure of whether what they are feeling is internal or external.

Imagine them learning and reciting poetry by heart, or reading the parts of *Othello* in class, learning to notice the difference between words that that are alive and words that have no resonance. Without an end to distract them, the students simply devote themselves to the particular lines of text before them, playing with them until they ring true (see Bachelard, 1969, xix).

When the lines resound with the vitality of a full body, who is providing the energy and meaning? Is it Shakespeare? Nick? Iago? Western civilization? Mr Schubert? The unanswerability of these questions lies at heart of interested impersonality, which gives devoted practice its cognitive power. When it arises from such practice, the work of Mr Schubert's students will be true to both Shakespeare and the students, at once *sensitive* and *sensuous*, as Nick puts it. This authenticity will be the proof that lessons have been well learned. The students will know Shakespeare in their bones and not just their minds. This will be a knowledge that stays alive and matures, that, decades later, brings to mind the quotation that tells the Supreme Court judge what (he didn't know) he needs to say.

Mr Schubert's devotional method of reading has also been the basis of Nick's creative writing practice. Rather than an expression of autonomy or identity, uniqueness is the particularity that comes from participation in a whole (*the*

language of the tribe). Nick's uniqueness is his living and responsive difference to his self-definition. It derives, not from being a member of a pre-existing thing, but, as Eliot says, from devotion to the unfolding of the potential of community:

> I think of literature … not as a collection of the writings of individuals, but as 'organic wholes'…. There is accordingly something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance, a devotion to which he must surrender … in order to obtain his unique position…. Between the true artists of any time there is, I believe, an unconscious community. … The second-rate artist cannot afford to surrender himself to any common action; for his chief task is the assertion of all the trifling differences which are his distinction: only the man who has so much to give that he can forget himself in his work can afford to collaborate, to exchange, to contribute. (1951, 24)

When critics complain about the stifling orthodoxy of the canon, they are thinking of subservient forms of devotion, obedience and surrender. To understand Eliot's point, we must be able to understand devotional practice as a monk would. Eliot is thinking of writing work that is truly different, because

it has been undertaken through a devotional practice that has suspended personal desire. He is thinking of work that comes from the living body of literature, from a place that is deeper and more primordial than self. Yeats refers to it as thinking that comes from the marrow-bone:

> God guard me from those thoughts men think
>
> In the mind alone;
>
> He that sings a lasting song
>
> Thinks in a marrow-bone
>
> (WB Yeats: *A Prayer for Old Age*)

Devotional practice allows students like Nick to participate unself-consciously in the literary tradition, so that it lives in their hearts and bones (see Bachelard, 1969, 11). No longer writing or reading as distinct individuals, they are reading, writing and living more deeply than they could have done on their own, while bringing their unique qualities to play within the tradition. The embodiment we are referring to here, then, is not to be reduced to the finite body of biomedical discourse. This is a body, or flesh (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), that is where Nick meets Donne, Mr Schubert, and all other participants in the 'organic whole' of the culture.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have argued that learning involves a transformation, a change not simply of mind but of being. Instead of understanding as an outsider, the learner understands with a depth that accompanies a suspension of insides and outsides. Through an encounter with a field of knowledge, learners become part of a living whole: Mr Schubert and his students are learning through their part in unfolding the potential of Dante, as Dante unfolds the potential of western literature and this classroom.

The implication of this is that learning comes from an open learning-and-teaching *relation*, an I-You relation of love, in which both teachers and students learn. We have argued that this relation is not brought about by teachers, but by devotional practice. Devoted practice allows the learner to attend to the work at hand, without the distortions and distractions of personal attachment. This attention is a respect for difference.

The role of the teacher, then, is to establish in the classroom a community of practice. They do this through their own devotion to practice, which involves a letting go of expectations and self-certainty. Mr Schubert's devotion to his practice meant that he was present to these students, this text, this class. His

trustworthiness allowed students to wholeheartedly engage with their work, knowing that he wouldn't be judging them against expectations. Moreover, the reliability of his witnessing allowed students to learn to trust their sense of the difference between loving and self-interested work. As Nick said, through teachers like Mr. Schubert, students learn to develop disciplines of practice which support them through their lives.

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