

FISHING FOR ANSWERS OR FISHING FOR MEN CHIP DENTON

Good teaching is hard to come by, but bad teaching is like falling off a log. There are more ways to get it wrong in the classroom than I can name, and those of us who have had the inestimable privilege to sit under a good teacher would do well to stop right now and give thanks. We might do better still to take out a note card and let that teacher know of our abiding gratitude. But I digress, for I mean to talk, first, of bad teaching. And of a particular kind of bad teaching that is to good teaching what playing the kazoo is to mastering the flute. I see it often (though, thankfully not at Trinity), and I have practiced it more than I care to confess, particularly when I am ill-prepared to face the class.

I am talking about fishing for answers. We've all been the victim of this kind of educational quackery. The teacher asks, "Who knows what the main difference between a communist and a socialist is?" What she means, in fact, is this: "Who will make my next point for me, which is to tell you what I understand to be the main difference between a communist and a socialist, but it would be much better if one of you would make it for me and I could leave the class thinking that someone has really learned something." A fail-proof sign of this sort of fishing expedition is the look of disappointment and even frustration on the teacher's face when someone gives an "incorrect" answer. Then follows a somewhat awkward transition, "What do some of the rest of you think?" (A good teacher knows that incorrect answers are the threshold to the house of understanding, and she will not pass by that door so quickly.) Sometimes a mountebank teacher in this predicament has to run through a veritable catena of students before landing on the right answer. And sometimes things grow truly desperate and the teacher shrugs her shoulders and says, "Let me just tell you what the difference is." At this point the teacher has spent ten minutes of the class' precious time doing what she might have done in thirty seconds, and no one is the wiser for it.

I suppose it could be argued that the students in the class have been taught something, in a way. But they have not been educated. Good teachers do not go fishing. They go exploring. They walk into the class with a great respect for the material (usually something everyone has read or is about to read) and for the students who have read it. They come with expectations, and they come with questions, but not the artless questions that simply give back what that teacher (or some predecessor) has stuck there, like a post-it note on their cerebral cortex. The English word education is derived from two Latin words which mean, literally, "to lead out," and a good class is really a lot like a spelunking adventure, with the teacher as the wise guide who knows the cave but does not know what, this time, the students will bring forth into the light. By her own vital interest in the subject at hand, the good teacher brings forth, or "educes," ideas and thoughts from her students, which neither she nor they knew were there.

Mark Van Doren (of the Great Books fame) was such a teacher. He taught Thomas

Merton, who immortalized his teacher in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Van Doren knew the Socratic secret that the good teacher does not “put sight into blind eyes” but awakens in each student an inherent power to learn:

Mark would come into the room and, without any fuss, would start talking about whatever was to be talked about. Most of the time he asked questions. His questions were very good, and if you tried to answer them intelligently, you found yourself saying excellent things that you did not know you knew, and that you had not, in fact, known before.

In this Van Doren, who was no stranger to the order of grace, was shadowing the Great Teacher, whose parables were really questions put to his disciples. If the teacher must go fishing, he will be casting for men and not for answers. I seem to recall that he told a parable about a net and some fish. And in that same text he left us this picture of the teacher: “Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old” (Matthew 13:52). This haul we call education.

Teachers who can teach like this are excellent indeed. And schools which have such teachers are not ordinary places of learning. If you find such a school, stay there. If you find such a teacher, take every course he teaches. If I could leave a legacy to Trinity, it would be that masters like this walk our halls. Already they do; may their tribe increase.