

# TEACH THE CHILDREN WELL

Allan M. Winkler  
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“Teach the children well.” That call echoes throughout the song “Teach Your Children” by Graham Nash, first recorded in 1970 on the album *Déjà Vu* by Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, and it has always spoken to me. I come from a family of teachers: my mother taught in elementary school and my father worked at the college level; and so teaching was always front and center in our family. Almost without thinking, I drifted into teaching, and have remained involved for the past 45 years, and my work in the classroom, reflecting the lovely song, has defined my life.

I didn't think much about teaching as an undergraduate at Harvard. I thought I wanted to be a lawyer, since I liked to debate, but in the end I drifted into graduate school rather than law school. Even after a year of graduate work, I didn't have a clue about what a teacher did. But then I left Columbia after receiving a Master's degree in History and joined the Peace Corps. I just assumed that my background might lead to teaching English, but in its infinite wisdom, the Peace Corps targeted me for elementary modern math instead, and that's what I did. Three months of training in Hawaii taught me the essentials of what I was supposed to know and teach, and I became an expert on set theory,

number lines, and different base systems of counting. And, best of all, I encountered people telling me how to teach.

For me, the most valuable part of the whole experience was practice teaching. I spent 6 weeks under the tutelage of a master teacher, first with 5th graders and then with 3rd graders. And the guidance I received there has served me well in the college classroom for the rest of my life. I learned how much I might say, before my students' eyes glazed over. I learned how to keep their attention. I learned when to joke, and when to become deadly serious. And I learned to see my students as real people, with whom I wanted to connect.

After training in Hawaii, we went overseas to Southeast Asia. Teaching in the Philippines taught me never to take anything for granted. Once, given the opportunity to teach a class in European History at the teacher-training college where I worked, I was doing a unit on the Inquisition. To dramatize the period, and the relentless investigations that occurred, I decided to accuse one of the students of heresy, and to cross-examine him in a way that left him no defense. When I had duly convicted him, I tied him to a chair with rope I had brought, as if to burn him at the stake, and lit a match. At that point, I figured that I had made my point, and so I blew out the match and asked the class, "What do you think of this process?" Much to my surprise, and dismay, in this heavily Catholic country, every one of the students said, "Oh, Sir, it's a good thing. It maintains the purity of the faith." It wasn't quite the lesson I had meant to convey, and I realized I was going to have to think more carefully about what I wanted to accomplish.

Another time in the Philippines, I gave an essay exam, and received 2 papers, from students sitting next to one another, that had exactly the same answers, word for word. I failed both of them, then called them in to ask just what they thought they were doing. They adamantly denied having copied, and showed me their notes. Both had memorized answers to questions they thought they might see from the same set of notes they had crafted together. So much for independent thinking, I thought to myself, but I understood that they were right and I was wrong, and I had to back down.

After the Peace Corps, I began a PhD program at Yale, and now had my first experience teaching American students. One year, I was one of a number of graduate students working as Teaching Assistants in a 20th Century US History course. At that time, we had no workshop on classroom teaching. The assumption was that we would simply copy what our major professor was doing, and everything would be OK. But it proved easier said than done. After our first discussion section, the group of us gathered in our mentor's office to compare notes. One of my friends came to the meeting in distress. Trying to be cool, he had begun the class by saying, "My name is Mike Stoff, and you can call me Mike, unless you have a hang-up with authority, and want to call me Mr. Stoff, or anything else you wish," whereupon one of the students in the back of the room raised his hand and said, "How about Shmuck?" Understandably, it deflated Mike, and all of us as well. How do you come back after a retort like that, I wondered. Somehow, Mike got through the class, and grew into a superb

teacher. But never in the 40+ years I've been teaching have I ever told students what to call me.

Once, still at Yale, after I had gotten my degree and was teaching a course of my own, I was giving a lecture on Teddy Roosevelt. The Teaching Assistants primed the class to laugh every time I mentioned Roosevelt's name. It took me about 5 minutes to catch on to what was happening. At first, I proudly thought I was just being funny, and complimented myself on doing well. But then I realized what was going on, and spent the rest of the lecture trying to outwit the students and talk as seriously as I could about TR without ever mentioning his name. It didn't always work, but I had fun trying.

Music is an important part of my life, and my use of it in the classroom began overseas. I had bought my first guitar in the summer of 1963, after finishing my freshman year in college, and made the serious mistake of neglecting to take lessons and trying to teach myself instead. Not only was I not very confident. I wasn't very good either. But that didn't matter as long as nobody heard me. After 5 years teaching at Yale, I went to Finland for a year as the Bicentennial Professor of American Studies at the University of Helsinki. When I came to a unit on civil rights, I decided to do something I had never done before: I brought my guitar to class and sang "Blowin' in the Wind" and "We Shall Overcome." Today, in Helsinki and in virtually all of Finland, most people speak good English. But that was less true in 1979. When the class was over, a young woman came up front and said, "Sir, that was wonderful!" I beamed, and she

went on to ask, "Do you know why?" When I nodded that I wanted her to continue, she said, "Because you were so bad." As my face fell, she realized what she had said, and tried haltingly to explain that what she meant was that even though I was not professional, I was still willing to sing in front of a class. But I felt mortified, and it kept me from performing in public for the next 10 years.

Some years later, after a stint at the University of Oregon, I found myself teaching at Miami University in nearby Oxford. Times had changed. The Great Society was long gone, and the era of liberal reform was over. We had gotten through the Reagan era, and conservatism had taken hold. I knew as well that my students at Miami were more conservative than those I had known at Yale, William Buckley's efforts notwithstanding. And I was determined to be as fair as I could in my presentation of what had gone on in the 1980s. As I lectured about Ronald Reagan, I talked about his extraordinary ability to relate to his audience. I spoke about how he was an absolute master of the one-liner, and with his acting ability was wonderful telling a joke. I related one of my favorites that he used in the campaign of 1980: "What do you call it when your neighbor loses his job? Answer: a recession. What do you call it when you lose your job? Answer: a depression. What do you call it when Jimmy Carter loses his job? Answer: a recovery. Then I spoke about how I remembered listening to Reagan give a speech on the radio, or watching him speaking on television, and as I switched the radio or TV off, saying to myself, "Damn, that was good," only to realize afterwards that I disagreed with everything I had heard. I know I'm an old-

fashioned New Deal liberal, but I was trying as hard as I could to be as fair as possible, and I do believe I was. But when I read evaluations at the end of the term, I was troubled that some rock-ribbed conservatives still felt that I was being biased since I had not acknowledged that Reagan was God's gift to the human race.

It's been a good run. I've been teaching now for 45 years. I still love being in the classroom, and plan, after a leave this spring, to teach one more year. That will bring me up to my 70th birthday, and more and more I'm finding that I just don't like to grade papers and exams any more. And so, for the first time, I'm thinking it's time to retire. But even as I make plans to step down in the summer of 2014, I can't help but hear that wonderful call of Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young to "teach the children well."