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## Teaching as a Form of Love

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Mark A. Chinen

OCT. 29, 2009—WILLIAM C. OLTMAN PROFESSORSHIP OF  
TEACHING EXCELLENCE

### INSTALLATION LECTURE

Good afternoon, everyone. Provost Crawford,<sup>1</sup> Dean Clark,<sup>2</sup> faculty and staff, students, and honored guests, thank you for your presence here on this rainy afternoon, at such a busy time, and for this opportunity to begin the Influential Voices Series by sharing some reflections on teaching. This school has many fine teachers, several of whom engage in scholarship in this area, and so John<sup>3</sup> is right to say this professorship speaks to this school's commitment to excellent teaching. I would like to thank Bill Oltman and all of my colleagues—to the extent I have accomplished anything as a teacher, it is because of your mentorship, scholarship, and support.

Many of us know of the author, Tillie Olsen. My favorite story of hers is *As I Stand Ironing*.<sup>4</sup> In it, a working class mother of a nineteen-year-old daughter is being urged by a school counselor to come to school to talk, because her daughter needs “help.”

That request lets loose a flood of memories and associations, regret, sadness, pride, and a bit of indignation. The mother feels she must give an account of herself, and this excerpt gives us a glimpse into her mind and heart:

I will never total it all . . . [she says.] She was a child seldom smiled at. Her father left . . . before she was a year old. I had to

work her first six years when there was work, or I sent her home and to his relatives . . . . She was dark and thin and foreign-looking in a world where prestige went to bloneness and curly hair and dimples, she was slow where glibness was prized. She was a child of anxious, not proud, love. We were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth . . . . My wisdom came too late.<sup>5</sup>

The mother concludes, “She has much to her and probably little will come of it . . . .”<sup>6</sup> But, “[I]et her be.” Not everything in her daughter will bloom, she concedes, but isn’t that true with everyone?

But the mother who stands ironing does have one request for her child, and it’s poignant because we never know if the counselor will ever hear this request: “Only help [my daughter] to know—help make it so there is *cause* for her to know—that she is more than this dress on the ironing board, helpless before the iron.”<sup>7</sup>

As you might imagine, over the last few weeks, I have been cognizant of things that have to do with teaching. Here are just a few: attending my twenty-fifth seminary reunion; hearing from my classmates how that experience has shaped their lives; attending a dinner to raise funds for children in Uganda, a country in which some of us work; listening last week to news of a bombing of a coed Islamic university; hosting a graduate of this school (his Seattle University degree opened one door after another until he found himself in a senior official position at a major international organization). We can never total all of these things. In each vignette, there are people whom we know are far more than pieces of clothing before the iron, but in their totality, these scenes show that this truth might be more “true” for some than for others.

The mission of this school is “to educat[e] outstanding lawyers . . . for a just and humane world.”<sup>8</sup> But several schools are represented here, each with its own purpose. My older daughter Maya’s school seeks to “prepare girls to be confident young women, strong in mind, body, and voice.”<sup>9</sup> The school my daughter Grace attends “is centered around the lives of children and dedicated to the development of their intellect and character.”<sup>10</sup> My

wife, Ruby,<sup>11</sup> besides teaching in the school of theology, works for an organization which operates a school for addiction recovery, which tries to provide homeless people with the life skills they need to overcome addiction and to live with mental illness.<sup>12</sup>

As I have tried to find the thread that runs through all of these events, missions, and schools, the one I am able to tease out is love—teaching as a form of love. I know that word might seem out of place here; it seems either obvious or naïve. But I would like to reflect on this possibility in at least two ways.

The first aspect of teaching as love goes to what we have already been talking about. It is what Martha Nussbaum describes as she dreams of the human person as “a dignified free being who shapes his or her own life, rather than . . . passively [being] shaped or pushed around by the world.”<sup>13</sup> Teaching might mean many things, but certainly it means to play a role in someone else’s becoming a full human being, one who has the abilities and opportunities to live a full life.

As many here know, Paulo Freire, in his famous *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, criticizes what he calls the “banking” approach to teaching.<sup>14</sup> In such an approach, the teacher is the “owner” of knowledge and doles it out to those who do not have it.<sup>15</sup> Freire writes from the context of people who live in extreme poverty and oppression, so that the dichotomy between the “haves” and “have nots” with respect to knowledge is associated with fear, power, violence, and powerlessness.<sup>16</sup> Freire argues the powerful “almost always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which include *a lack of confidence in the people’s ability to think, to want, and to know.*”<sup>17</sup> For Freire, to teach like a banker is to replicate in the classroom whatever structures are oppressive and dehumanizing.<sup>18</sup>

I do not need to adopt the framework of oppression to understand how my failure to recognize my students’ abilities can affect adversely both them and me. It is the exact opposite of what Socrates intended—that

teaching is about recognizing in others the power to know and to understand, and to draw that power out of them.<sup>19</sup> Teaching becomes a maieutic relationship, a bringing to birth of what already exists inside every person.<sup>20</sup>

I do not usually associate Bill Oltman's teaching with midwifery, but he often said, "I don't answer questions because I don't want the class to view me as the answer man. I want my students to work out the answers themselves, because if they do, those answers will be theirs, not mine." I think this speaks to a trust and confidence in students. Nussbaum writes this about philosophy and her faith in reasoning:

[P]hilosophers start a conversation in which the reason of each of us is the interlocutor. What we are trusting . . . is this process, and ultimately, therefore, our own reasoning powers. Theory is preferred to ordinary judgment . . . because, through it, we get the best out of ourselves.<sup>21</sup>

You and I might have more or less confidence in reason and in theory than does Nussbaum, but for her, they are never ends in themselves. They represent this one aspect of teaching as love: to treat someone with dignity by insisting on and bringing to birth the best out of those we teach.

But there is one more aspect of teaching I would like to discuss. The mother who stands ironing, who totalizes, knows that her daughter's prospects have been impacted by forces beyond the classroom: a lack of resources, inadequate care, and inequalities associated with gender, class, and race.<sup>22</sup> But for better or for worse, it is *this* particular world in which she and her daughter find themselves. They must relate to this particular community, and she and her daughter must try to make their home in it, as must we. But as Martti Koskenniemi argues, "every community is based on an exclusion."<sup>23</sup> And both we and our students cannot help but ask where in the community we stand, or whether we stand in the community at all. What might teaching have to do with that question?

Many of us are aware of Parker Palmer's argument that the classroom should be a community of truth—a place where teacher and student gather

around one of the great subjects of study.<sup>24</sup> For Palmer, what emerges is a community<sup>25</sup> which engages in a conversation “that keeps testing old conclusions and coming into new ones.”<sup>26</sup>

This sounds very much like Freire’s conception of what should happen in the classroom. He writes:

The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow . . . Here, no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. [People] teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in banking education are ‘owned’ by the teacher.<sup>27</sup>

This community becomes the basis for Freire’s praxis—the lived-out dialogue of action and reflection, which, in his view, is a way of being in the world that allows people to comprehend it and to act in it with purpose. But what is equally important, for Freire, is that this praxis enables a person to have a hand in shaping that world.<sup>28</sup> So teaching is about the honing of capacities that already exist in the other. And it is about teacher and student forming a community as they explore together particular subjects. But teaching is also an invitation to both teacher and student to be better integrated into, and—if Freire is right—to transform the wider human community. It is an invitation to life and love, which—whether we like it or not—is possible only in that community.

But how can that be, particularly for those of us who teach law?

When I was in practice, I had lunch with a fellow associate who was just completing his dissertation on law and religion. We sat in the firm’s cafeteria; parts of the Washington, D.C., skyline were visible through the window. We talked about our clients and his dissertation, and I asked him the question, “Do you think that the practice of law can be a form of love?” He looked at me and laughed. I smiled ruefully by way of saying, “I know what you mean.”

I have been studying the work of the ethicist and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr for a paper I am writing, and what he has to say about this issue is not very comforting. Niebuhr was skeptical of society's ability to love. He argued that "[n]ations, classes, and races do not love one another."<sup>29</sup> Why? This is because Niebuhr defined love as pure disinterestedness, a disregard for one's own interest in favor of the interests of others.<sup>30</sup> But Niebuhr believed that self-interest is far too persistent, too much a part of what he called the "vitalit[ies]" of human life,<sup>31</sup> vitalities that enable human beings to be more than clothing before an iron. This self-interest becomes more and more assertive as social groups rise from lower to higher levels of organization.<sup>32</sup> We are forced to resolve the competing claims of the many groups, to engage in a balancing of interests, including those of one's own group, and as soon as we do that, we are no longer talking about disinterested love.<sup>33</sup>

This is why justice and law are needed. For Niebuhr, "Justice seeks to determine what I owe my family as compared with my nation; or what I owe this segment as against that segment of a community."<sup>34</sup> Legal norms emerge as "compromises between the rational-moral ideals of what ought to be, and the possibilities of the situation as determined by given equilibria of vital forces."<sup>35</sup> (Whatever that means.)

Here's what I think he meant. Like the good Calvinist he was, Niebuhr seemed to condemn us to a kind of twilight zone in which we are torn between two worlds, the world in which we spend most of our time being a pretty grim place, one where we are constantly jostling for our piece of bread. And he has a point, doesn't he? We all know about law's compromises, its failures, which in turn reflect the failures of the larger society. As Langdon Gilkey writes: "history to its end will be characterized by tragedy, violence, and suffering."<sup>36</sup>

But there is more to life than that. Niebuhr was, as I said, a theologian (although he did not identify himself as one), and he believed in an entity

that transcends human existence and all its ambiguities, which makes room for what is represented by love. As Gilkey puts it, there is in Niebuhr's view, "an opening out, or an opening up . . . of my world. . . . The roof . . . [is] suddenly lifted off this confined cultural space, allowing me to see that observable world as I had not been able to see it before and to breathe freely."<sup>37</sup>

For Niebuhr, it was this possibility of the transcendent and the space it creates that allows love, not reason, to serve as law's interlocutor. Love, for Niebuhr, is "both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history."<sup>38</sup> Under this view, love and law will always be in dialogue with each other. Law will always be answerable to love.

I realize not everyone is willing to take the theological turn. I must confess to having doubts myself. But some here have heard me quote from Frederick Buechner, that the place where God calls us is the place where our great gladness and the world's hunger meet,<sup>39</sup> and that when I am honest with myself, to the extent I have had any real religious experience or any sense of the transcendent, it has been when I do the things that make for joy and when I respond in some way to the world's hunger, its hunger for food, for peace and justice, for beauty, for knowledge, and for understanding itself.

Let me spend my last five minutes or so describing what this might mean in more concrete terms. Dean Clark introduced the faculty and staff of Seattle Urban Academy. Sharon Okamoto, its principal, is a good friend of Ruby and mine. Seattle Urban Academy is a small, faith-based high school in south Seattle that works with at-risk youth.<sup>40</sup> These are students who have not succeeded anywhere else. But they come to the school with hope and a desire to do well. Some do not; some do not survive. According to Sharon, in the past six years, six young men who have attended or graduated from the school have lost their lives as a result of violence. But most come to understand their potential; they come to know they are loved. They graduate, and 91 percent of them go on to college or employment.

I have Sharon's permission to share this. What motivates her to put in twelve-hour work days and weekends is a sense of call to this work, but also personal experience: many years ago, her sister took her own life, and Sharon wants to make sure that there is not some other young person out there who feels powerless and alone. This is her way of responding to the world's hunger.

Last month, four of us from the law school met for the first time over dinner with Sharon and some of her colleagues. The conversation was as you might expect: trying to make connections, talk about fishing, football, and baseball. And there was more: Bryan Adamson shared about predatory lending practices and their impact on the community, about some of the intricacies of the Community Reinvestment Act. The teachers from Seattle Urban Academy shared about their students: how they are bright and hopeful, but how every message they have received in their young lives is that they are failures. People discussed what the kids see and experience on their way to school, what some of them go through at home. We heard about the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. Natasha Martin discussed the contrasts between Seattle and cities with large, historic African-American communities like Atlanta and Houston. Hank McGee talked about the demographic changes in Seattle's Central District and the migration of African Americans to Renton and to Kent.<sup>41</sup> We heard from Sharon's husband John, who works with teachers in the public schools, about some of the issues facing the Kent School District, with its growing multiculturalism and economic diversity.<sup>42</sup>

As we shared that meal, people shared themselves, their passions, their hard-won knowledge and experience, and I felt around that table the possibility for welcome and connection with one another and to the wider community, and it was profoundly satisfying. I am sure the wine Hank brought with him had something to do with it, but I believe that love was at that table.

As the dinner ended, we learned one of Sharon's teachers is applying to law school. It would be fitting were he to come here, but no matter which law school he attends, the challenge for his future professors will be the same. It is the challenge that every teacher faces, no matter what subject he or she teaches. We will have in our classrooms someone who, by action and experience, is already committed to responding to the great need for justice and reconciliation. He will be asking us, we who have brought our own backgrounds and passions to the law, to help him develop the skills and knowledge that will better equip him to serve whichever legal community he joins. I have to ask myself: While he is with us, will we be a community of teachers and scholars for him? Will we trust that he has within him the power to know and to understand? Will we challenge him to think more deeply and to be true to his commitments? Will we share with him the perspectives we have gained, as we ourselves wrestle with those very same issues, as we ourselves try to find our place around the table?

If we do just a few of these things, we will have gone a long way toward fulfilling what all parents want for their children, what all of us want for those whom we love and for ourselves: to help us to know, to give us all cause to know, that we are destined for life and for love.

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<sup>1</sup> Isiaah Crawford is the provost of Seattle University.

<sup>2</sup> Annette Clark is Associate Professor of Law at Seattle University School of Law and served as Interim Dean from 2009-2010.

<sup>3</sup> John Mitchell is Professor of Law at Seattle University School of Law.

<sup>4</sup> TILLIE OLSEN, *I Stand Here Ironing*, PACIFIC SPECTATOR (1956), reprinted in TELL ME A RIDDLE 9 (Dell Publishing Co., Inc. 1976).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 21 (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> *Mission*, SEATTLE UNIV. SCH. OF LAW, [http://www.law.seattleu.edu/The\\_School/Mission.xml](http://www.law.seattleu.edu/The_School/Mission.xml) (last visited Sept. 23, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> *Mission & Vision*, LAKE WASH. GIRLS MIDDLE SCH., <http://www.lwgms.org/mission-vision/> (last visited Sept. 23, 2010).

- <sup>10</sup> *Explore UCDS*, UNIV. CHILD DEV. SCH., [http://www.ucds.org/main\\_explore\\_page.html](http://www.ucds.org/main_explore_page.html) (last visited Sept. 23, 2010).
- <sup>11</sup> Ruby Takushi, Ph.D., is Program Director at the Recovery Café, and Adjunct Professor at the Seattle University School of Theology and Ministry.
- <sup>12</sup> Information about Recovery Café and its programs, including classes, is available at RECOVERY CAFÉ, <http://www.recoverycafe.org/> (last visited Sept. 23, 2010).
- <sup>13</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Capabilities and Social Justice*, 4 INT'L STUD. REV. 123, 123–24, 130 (2002).
- <sup>14</sup> See PAOLO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED* 57–74 (Myra Bergman Ramos trans., Continuum 1970).
- <sup>15</sup> *See id.*
- <sup>16</sup> *See generally id.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 46 (emphasis added).
- <sup>18</sup> *See id.* at 58, 60, 65.
- <sup>19</sup> See SØREN KIERKEGAARD, *PHILOSOPHICAL FRAGMENTS: OR, A FRAGMENT OF PHILOSOPHY* 13 (David F. Swenson & Howard V. Hong trans., Princeton Univ. Press 1962) (1844).
- <sup>20</sup> *See generally id.*
- <sup>21</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *On Moral Progress: A Response to Richard Rorty*, 74 U. CHI. L. REV. 939, 956 (2007).
- <sup>22</sup> *See* Olsen, *supra* note 4, at 20.
- <sup>23</sup> MARTTI KOSKENNIEMI, *THE GENTLE CIVILIZER OF NATIONS: THE RISE AND FALL OF INTERNATIONAL LAW 1870–1960*, 517 (2001).
- <sup>24</sup> *See* PARKER J. PALMER, *THE COURAGE TO TEACH: EXPLORING THE INNER LANDSCAPE OF A TEACHER'S LIFE* 90, 95 (1997).
- <sup>25</sup> *See id.* at 102–03.
- <sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 104.
- <sup>27</sup> FREIRE, *supra* note 14, at 67.
- <sup>28</sup> *See id.* at 97, 126.
- <sup>29</sup> REINHOLD NIEBUHR, *The Spirit of Justice*, reprinted in *LOVE AND JUSTICE: SELECTIONS FROM THE SHORTER WRITINGS OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR* 25 (D.B. Robertson ed., Westminster/John Knox Press 1957).
- <sup>30</sup> 2 REINHOLD NIEBUHR, *THE NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN: A CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION* 246–47 (1943).
- <sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 258.
- <sup>32</sup> REINHOLD NIEBUHR, *The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem*, reprinted in *LOVE AND JUSTICE: SELECTIONS FROM THE SHORTER WRITINGS OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR*, *supra* note 30, at 39.
- <sup>33</sup> REINHOLD NIEBUHR, *Justice and Love*, reprinted in *LOVE AND JUSTICE: SELECTIONS FROM THE SHORTER WRITINGS OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR* 27–29 (D.B. Robertson ed., Westminster/John Knox Press 1957).
- <sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 28.
- <sup>35</sup> NIEBUHR, *supra* note 31, at 257.
- <sup>36</sup> LANGDON GILKEY, *ON NIEBUHR: A THEOLOGICAL STUDY* 22 (Univ. of Chicago Press 2001).

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 11.

<sup>38</sup> NIEBUHR, *supra* note 29, at 246.

<sup>39</sup> See FREDERICK BUECHNER, WISFUL THINKING: A THEOLOGICAL ABC 95 (1973).

<sup>40</sup> For information about Seattle Urban Academy, see SEATTLE URBAN ACAD., <http://www.seattleurbanacademy.org> (last visited Sept. 23, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Bryan Adamson and Natasha Martin are Associate Professors of Law, and Hank McGee is Professor of Law at Seattle University School of Law.

<sup>42</sup> John Okamoto is Executive Director of the Washington Education Association.