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Our University – Teachers as Masters of Their Own Fate

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Our University – Teachers as Masters of Their Own Fate

Fifth in a series on teaching excellence

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.*

-- William Ernest Henley

One of the most powerful aspects of being a university faculty member is having the freedom to do what you think best in the interest of students in order to carry out the mission of a university.

A great day for any teacher occurs when a student believes Henley's meaning because of the influence the teacher has exerted. Student and teacher working in unison achieve this breakthrough; working together *"to make the world a better place"* I was once told.

This is where the magic in teaching lives. It is not about programs.

You'll not find a more strident advocate for recognizing teaching excellence than me. Universities have been known to stop rewarding excellence in teaching when enrollment is down or funding is off. The perfectly wrong response. In many cases programs rewarding teaching excellence will neither create nor encourage it. The best teachers teach in spite of everything because they actually believe Henley. It is intrinsic.

Believing Henley means faculty members sense in their own work something akin to what ministers, doctors, and true public servants refer to as a calling.

The challenge is that the great teacher must dwell in an ecosystem of teamwork, accrediting standards, promotion and tenure, peer groups, state regulations, rules, contracts, and other forces inside and outside the academy that try to exert influence on the interactions that occur in the classroom. All those forces have a smoothing effect on excellence. Excellence should be a bit rough around the edges, personalized, as it never occurs twice in the same way.

And the equation for teaching excellence makes the Riemann Hypothesis look like Ned in the first reader.

If programs could create excellence, if workshops were successful, if centers for teaching excellence would make it happen, if higher ACT or SAT scores would address the issue, our quest would be simple. Recognizing the limits of such actions and measures does not diminish their importance.

However, teaching excellence is a narrow street with teacher and students going in both directions simultaneously. Everything trivial falls to the wayside when excellence in teaching and excellence in learning travel the same thoroughfare.

Nelson Mandela recited *Invictus* regularly to fellow inmates. And, while not intending to compare excellent teaching to imprisonment or its life-changing impact, it is impossible not to relate the two: from St. Paul to Mandela prison has, on occasion, had the impact of freeing a person to think for him- or herself.

Is that not the purpose of all teaching?

Reverend King's teaching, embodied in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, may be one of the most eloquent calls for a practically applied vision of the principles of moral and natural law when he quotes Aquinas, "*An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law.*"

Is this too heady for calculus or history students at a state university?

When teaching is ignited by human passion, it empowers people to change the way they think, to have a positive impact on those around them, and to see how something simple can be profound in its application. That is the teaching we should hold up and say, "*This is our benchmark*".

No rule-driven recipes for doing an adequate job will ever fan the flame of passion needed for students to see themselves the way Henley saw himself after his foot and a portion of leg were amputated... "*I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.*"