

Preface

A celebrated historian, a man who had won many awards for his writing, was invited to give an address at a great American university. In conjunction with his visit, the university's former president, a highly distinguished scholar and leader in his own right, invited him to lunch. As the two were dining, the former president asked the historian whether he had majored in history in college.

"No," the historian replied, "I was an English major. In fact, I did not take a single history course until my very last semester."

"That must have been quite a course," the former president replied.

The historian paused, looking at the trees outside the windows, "Actually, I do not remember much about it. I cannot even tell you the name of the instructor. He was not a faculty member, but a graduate student."

"So the course didn't make much of an impression on you?" prompted the former president.

"Actually, I was very inspired by something the instructor said on the first day of class," the historian replied. "He told us, 'We are going to be studying many different historical ages, events, and personages. As we do so, never forget that we are not just talking about names in books. We are talking about real, flesh-and-blood human beings, people as real as you and I.'"

The historian again looked out at the trees. "That really impressed me. I have never forgotten it. In everything I have written, I have always tried to capture the sense that we are dealing with real people, who got up every morning and laid their heads down every night. They were human beings just like us, who bore children, buried their parents, and who were in turn buried by their children. They gazed up at the very same sun, moon, and starry night sky that shine now above us."

"That's a beautiful story," the former president replied. "To which I would add one coda. The graduate student who taught that course?"

"Yes?" said the historian.

"You're looking at him."

Henry Adams, one of the great American intellectual historians, once wrote about teaching:

A teacher affects eternity; no one can tell where his influence stops.

Every educator was once a learner, and every learner becomes an educator. Whether we hold a faculty position or not, to practice medicine is to be a teacher. For one thing, the title by which our patients know us, doctor, comes from a Latin root that means teacher. Moreover, every interaction with a patient or fellow health professional is an opportunity to teach. We teach not only formally, with syllabi and curricula, but also informally, through the questions we ask and the examples we set.

Everyone knows that we learners model ourselves, unconsciously as well as consciously, after our teachers. We remember what we are assigned to study, we mimic the styles and phrasings of those who taught us, and when faced with difficult situations, we ask ourselves how our most esteemed teachers would respond.

Yet we sometimes forget the profound impact of learners on educators. There is a story about the behaviorist psychologist B.F. Skinner, whose students at Harvard decided to test out the theory of behaviorism on their instructor. During lecture, every time Skinner leaned to his right, the students would feign boredom, looking out the window or putting their heads on their desks. Every time Skinner leaned to his left, the students would show great interest, hanging on his every word. By the midpoint of the lecture, so the story goes, Skinner was leaning so far to his left that he fell from the podium.

Do students care about what instructors have to teach and how they teach it? Do they have learning objectives beyond the material that is going to be included on the next test? Do they realize that excellence in medicine has more to do with attitude, style, and philosophy than with facts and rules? Do they see that it is less about downloading, storing, and retrieving information than about imbibing and embodying character?

Do the members of the faculty come prepared to convey genuine curiosity, commitment, and excitement about their approach to health and disease? Do the members of the student body come prepared not only to memorize but to be challenged and inspired? What if faculty members never really invest themselves in the teaching, instead just reading their notes? What if students never really show up at all?

Education is like a dance, and it takes two to tango. Just because certain curricular material was presented in class does not mean that a faculty member truly fulfilled an educational mission. The mere fact that seats were warmed does not prove that learners really glimpsed what is most worth knowing.

Great education is like great jazz. To respond creatively in the moment requires attentiveness, playfulness, and generosity. Like great medicine, it cannot be preprogrammed. There is no checklist or set of algorithms or heuristics. Thank God it is not that easy! If it were, there would be no illumination and no joy in it.

Instead, there is only the promise. If we pour ourselves heart and soul into it, whether on the dance floor or the keyboard, at the bedside, or in the classroom, we may catch a glimpse of it. We are talking about something more than well-formulated learning objectives, sound pedagogical techniques, and high scores on high-stakes exams. We are talking about genius, something worth recalling and celebrating for a lifetime, perhaps longer. We are talking about a spark that we carry inside and, when conditions are favorable, summon forth to light anew, like the passing of a torch.

The educator? The learner? The learner? The educator? You're looking at him. Who can say where such influence starts or stops?

The purpose of the second edition of this book is to serve as the catalyst for reflection on excellence in medical education. What do we need to attend to make the most of the opportunities before us—as both educators and learners? What does real excellence in medical education look like, and what would be necessary to achieve it? What steps can we take to ensure that we pass on the torch of medicine burning a bit more brightly than when it was handed to us, and help each succeeding generation to do the same? It is my hope that each of these essays will serve as a starting point for medical educators and learners to engage in just this sort of conversation.



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