

# The National Teaching & Learning FORUM



Volume 6

Number 5

1997

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## VIEWPOINT

### The Hands of a Teacher

"The great teacher touches lives."

—Anon.

*William Reinsmith  
Philadelphia College of Pharmacy  
and Science*

**S**ooner or later you must come near. You have to move in close to students and let each one feel the warmth of your presence. Teachers talk—we must talk: announcing, directing, warning, urging, asking, reacting. But most of us overtalk. Researchers have found that "teacher talk" often takes up four-fifths of classroom time. We often say we need to talk in order to create a structure for teaching. But I say that sooner or later a teacher must come near, stand next to, crouch down beside students, for we are not merely voices in a wilderness of unformed minds, we are whole beings, minds carried about in bodies:

...Chris got very close to the children. Sometimes, leaning over them, she'd almost touch her wide, changeable eyes to theirs. They could smell her perfume, hear her breathing, and some, such as Felipe and Jimmy, would go all squirmy, like kittens rubbing their flanks against their master's ankle, while Clarence might even

relax his vigilance and fail to see a stranger at the door. (Tracy Kidder, *Among School Children*)

In the lower grades this place of close communion symbolizes the sacred place of teaching, a place where the teacher and learning come alive together for the student, and children flourish. In this space of trust and caring, the artistic teacher touches her students—figuratively certainly, literally often. Her being nudges their minds awake:

Carol passed David in her crossing of the room and touched him gently on the shoulder. David continued with eyes tracking for almost a minute... A few seconds later she was [back] beside him humming a tune...

Carol then knelt down on her knees and whispered in David's ear. His eyes stopped tracking, he tilted his head to listen and he looked down at the paper. Carol continued to whisper, then she touched his back gently, rose, and moved away. (John C. Hill, "The Teacher as Artist: A Case for Peripheral Supervision." *The Educational Forum* 49 Winter 1985: 217)

Teaching is so much more than talking. At the core of teaching is a silent act of love, a movement toward wholeness. No one has put it more dramatically than Sylvia Ashton-Warner. Teaching, she said, is an act of espousal:

When I teach people, I marry them.... There is quietly

occurring in my infant room a grand espousal. To bring them to do what I want them to do, they come near me, I draw them near me, in body and in spirit. They don't know it, but I do. They become part of me, like a lover. (Ashton-Warner, *Teacher*, 1963)

*Teacher* is the best, most moving book I have ever read on teaching, and though it was reprinted in the 1970 and 1980s, I wonder if any publisher could find the courage to publish such words today. What has changed? Is teaching no longer "a silent act of love, a movement toward wholeness" as I have described it? No, what has

changed is that we have learned—again, and painfully—that no trust, however sacred, can be taken for granted.

Only a few weeks ago a court case in Texas focused attention on the breach of such trust by a teacher who is also a priest. And, sadly, in the thirty plus years since *Teacher* first appeared, many such cases have come to light. Because of them, important strides have been made in defining and setting prohibitions against sexual harassment. Bringing the truth to light and creating protection from harm are all to the

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We have allowed the worst to proscribe the best and allowed evil to make aspects of the good unspeakable.

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good. And so why am I writing about this risky topic from a somewhat different perspective? For several reasons, all of them stemming from my desire to be a complete being in my identity as a teacher.

In making the space between teachers and students safer, we have also created more distance between them. In making it safer, we have given in to fear. We have allowed the worst to proscribe the best and allowed evil to make aspects of the good unspeakable. In allowing a sense of taboo to enter this space, we have begun to deny its existence and its sacredness. To some extent, we, as teachers, have begun to

accept a denial of ourselves as whole beings.

I offer no easy answer to the loss I feel. The space between student and teacher, the trust it demands to be fully effective, is so sacred we easily understand the reaction to learning of its being violated. And yet, what has happened to that space? Does it now stand like an abandoned house in some outgrown understanding of teaching? A place never to be restored, redefined, reoccupied?

### Revisiting Winesburg

I feel a sadness, a personal sadness. And I find myself thinking about hands, the instruments of touch, and I find myself recalling the story "Hands" from Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

If we think of it at all, we think of the loss I am describing as something new—but it isn't. Teachers have long been suspect as whole people; that's part of the sadness. *Winesburg, Ohio* dates from 1919, and we could probably find earlier evidence of this intimacy between student and teacher being understood and, at the same time, feared.

"Hands" tells the story of Wing Biddlebaum (a pseudonym for a real teacher, Adolph Meyers) and his student, young George Willard, the reporter through whose eyes we're shown the people of Winesburg. Over time Biddlebaum had become friends with George. He wanted to get through to him, to tell George that he was destroying himself by imitating his peers rather than following his own inclination to be alone and dream. In the pivotal scene, this timid man stands beside his pupil talking. He becomes animated; his hands come out of his pockets and seem to take on a life of their own. He lays his hand on George's shoulder and tells him: "You must try to forget all you have learned. You must begin to dream. From this time on you must shut your ears to the roaring of the voices."

And then a look of horror sweeps over Biddlebaum's face.

Teachers have long known this intimate space is also perilously threatened by misunderstanding. More often it's misunderstood by those outside the teaching-learning circle than by those within it. Here's how Anderson describes the way

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The Oryx Press  
4041 North Central #700  
Phoenix, Arizona 85012  
Phone: 1-800-279-6799

### The National Teaching & Learning Forum

is published six times during the academic year by The Oryx Press in conjunction with James Rhem & Associates, Inc. – October, December, February, March, May, September. One-year individual subscription: \$39.

Second class postage paid at Phoenix, AZ.

Postmaster: Send change of address to:

### The National Teaching & Learning Forum

4041 North Central #700  
Phoenix, Arizona 85012

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An E-mail edition of the Forum is available to individuals for \$32.00. Significant discounts available to entire institutions.

<http://www.ntf.com>  
September

## Editor's Note:

It overstates matters to call **Parker Palmer** a "regular contributor" to the *Forum*, but—a friend and fellow resident of Madison, Wisconsin—he has been a loyal supporter of the publication and contributed to it twice before. Both of those pieces—"The Courage to Teach" (V1N2) and "The Loom of Teaching" (V3N3)—were notes along the way in his writing of *The Courage to Teach* which Jossey-Bass will publish this November. This issue's lead story excerpts Chapter Three, in which Parker looks at some of the innate paradoxes in teaching. This excerpt (the publishers have graciously allowed me to post a further one on the *Forum's* Web site) lays out the conceptual framework of paradox in the context of teaching and invites faculty to enter into an exercise of personal discovery about their teaching. In a sense, much of Parker's writing works this way: it offers a healing, if sometimes uncomfortably honest, conceptualization and invites us to see what happens when we view our own experience through this lens. What often happens is that we begin to feel a new spring in our step almost before we realize we had been limping.

I put "regular contributor" in quotations above, because this issue introduces two official regular contributors to the *Forum*. Both passed their auditions in previous issues: **Tom Creed** in V6N4 with his piece on PowerPoint, and **Laura Border** in V6N3 with hers on the "five points approach" to faculty development. Tom will coordinate and contribute to the *Forum's* coverage of technology and pedagogy in a column called "Techped." Currently, we're awash in technology, but most faculty still wonder if it will help them teach better and how it will, if it will. I think Tom has some of the answers, and he's already begun to hear from some *Forum* readers who have others.

Think of Laura as a philosophical ruminator on the business of teaching and working with faculty and graduate assistants in thinking about teaching. As readers of Laura's critique of the "five-point approach" know, she writes with spirit (and, at times, impatience) about the ways of thinking about teaching that make sense and those that don't. I'm calling her column "Fundamentals." While both columns appear in this issue, they will appear alternately in future ones. Both columns are accompanied by supplemental materials posted on the *Forum's* Web site. (Do remember that if you are a subscriber and you're not on the Web, you can have these materials sent to you by requesting them from Customer Service at the toll-free number given in the masthead.)

There have been so many developments over the summer involving enriched connections between the *Forum* and its Web site that I'm taking space later in this issue to tell you about them in more depth. It's enough to say here that the publication you're subscribing to has gotten more valuable, adding resources and a level of connectivity barely imaginable when it started almost seven years ago.

Finally, a word about **Bill Reinsmith's** essay, "The Hands of a Teacher." Bill contributed one of the most popular and reprinted pieces in the *Forum's* history back in 1993 (V2N4), "Ten Fundamental Laws of Learning." He's the author of an interesting book called *Archetypal Forms in Teaching* (Greenwood Press, 1992). But this essay differs from both of those. For some it will prove controversial. But I ask you to consider the things it has in common with Parker Palmer's piece. Both ask us to remember our "hidden wholeness," to make it less hidden, and, in remembering it, to find ways not to forget our wholeness as we teach.

— James Rhem

Biddlebaum/Meyers's students saw him:

Here and there went his hands, caressing the shoulders of the boys, playing about the tousled heads. As he talked his voice became soft and musical. There was a caress in that also. In a way the voice and the hands, the stroking of the shoulders and the touching of the hair were a part of the schoolmaster's effort to carry a dream into the young minds. By the caress that was in his fingers he expressed himself... Under the caress of his hands doubt and disbelief went out of the minds of the boys and they began to dream. (*Winesburg, Ohio*)

But, Anderson reports, a "half-witted boy," while dreaming, "imagined unspeakable things and the next morning went forth to tell his dreams as facts." It did not take long for citizens to question other boys and to learn that indeed Meyers's hands had tousled their hair and touched their shoulders. A shiver went through the town where Meyers had taught.

Although he did not understand what had happened he felt that the hands must be to blame. Again and again the fathers of the boys had talked of the hands: "Keep your hands to yourself," the saloon keeper had roared, dancing with fury in the schoolhouse yard. (*Winesburg, Ohio*)

It makes us uncomfortable to read this material. We've heard too many stories of students abused and violated by teachers more caught up in their own illnesses than in fostering confidence, learning, and vision. It doesn't seem worth the risk to try and explain the importance of the intimacy that was misused in these cases, and it especially does not seem worth the risk of trying to explain how touching might figure into it.

### These Mute Palms

But I am left thinking about hands. Hands may be nondescript in every other facet of our lives, but in the area of our greatest care, hands can take on a life of their own. I think of the woman who conducts the chamber chorale I sing with whose hands move through the air

like wings directing the music's flight. I think of my brother-in-law, an engineer, drawing diagrams when he speaks, his hands moving

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quickly in sure, sharp, rapid strokes; a colleague-scholar whose body suggests ponderous thoughts and slow movement, except for his hands, which are delicately sensitive and which—in discussion—take flight to make a point. I seldom notice hands until they are in action doing what they love.

"Gestures," you say, "Fine. That's not touching."

Let me go further. I remember an Italian boy in my neighborhood who would always talk with his hand on your shoulder or your arm. It was as if he opened up a space that was there just for the two of you. And he did this as naturally as one would walk or eat. I am full of admiration as I remember this, and yet I will confess it made some of us uneasy. Touching was not part of our usual means of communicating, unless it was to display force—to shove or hit.

And, finally, I think of my own hands, the hands of a teacher. To this day, I often stand with my arms folded when I talk with students (and with people in general), not being sure what to do with my hands, never having really learned. The constraint and unease I feel is very old and it's only been made worse by the scandals we've encountered since Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* was first published in 1963.

I, for one, have always talked too much in the classroom. I feel the weariness of talking. I wish I could shut my words down and find new ways to communicate with my distanced students. I want to bring them close, to touch their dreams. I often wonder if my incessant talking isn't a way of avoiding "the mind/

body problem" and of realizing that I teach out of the unity of the two.

And I wonder how different the quality of my teaching would be if I allowed myself—at least sometimes—to actually touch my students, to nudge them lovingly toward self-discovery. I know I would be a much better teacher. But I suspect I would also be a more endangered one.

### The False made True

So what's the problem? And what am I asking for? I'm not asking permission to impose cuddly hugs on my women students or pat the men on the behind like a fellow baseball player in a locker room. Those are the crude pictures blotting out the understanding I fear we're losing. The sacred space between teacher and student that Ashton-Warner describes applies just as much to college students and their teachers as to grade school students and theirs. But we are all in danger of losing the sacredness of it forever, and I think Sherwood Anderson could probably explain why. In "The Book of the Grotesque," the preface to the Winesburg stories, he writes: "It was the truths that made the people grotesques . . . The moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood."

Although the space where a teacher lays his hand on a student's shoulder and the moment that cements the teaching-learning dynamic between them is an intimate and private one, its importance must be widely and publicly understood. There are many such intimate and private moments in our experience that enjoy such public understanding. The truth of those moments in teaching should not be lost. Some of the most exciting talk about teaching these days speaks of making teaching visible, of making it community property. The tenuous intimacy of teaching, the ability of teachers to teach without fear as whole beings may depend on fully admitting the truth of this intimacy to ourselves and then going shamelessly public with it. I submit that



outside the shadow of fear and taboo—where it has long huddled—and in the light of public understanding, it would not be grotesque, but beautiful. And teaching would be valued all the more if we let everyone see it.

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