THOUGHTS ON
TEACHING & LEARNING
by
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1966 National Teacher of the Year

Whatever we do in teaching depends upon what we think people are like. What will this child be like if he should reach his fullest potential? What makes a truly adequate person? Can we teach him to be something as well as to know something? If we can, we teachers must be something, as well as know something. We must feel ourselves adequate, and lead the children to feel adequate – as persons of dignity.

I believe that the class room is a laboratory for self-discover and for discovering the joy of learning. There must be a climate for a deep respect for uniqueness, where uniqueness is encouraged and difference is valued. Children learn acceptance from being accepted.

Teaming of teaching can make teachers more adequate and make them develop their own image of “self”. Every person has the capacity for creativity. As we become more adequate, we are free to be more creative and free and open to the excitement of learning. And as we are, so often are our children.

I value the kind of grouping that allows each child to learn at his most rapid pace and to make his unique contribution to the class. Grouping needs to be flexible, and reorganized as learning rates vary, or groups may be dissolved as particular skills are achieved.

We must open subject matter for children, not cover it. We must teach for openness, for new experiences beyond the routine subject matter. Children also learn as they encounter cultures different from their own.

Teaching for creativity requires creative teaching. It is not easy teaching. It calls for restructuring of learning activities. It calls for restructuring of buildings. Our buildings with flexible, movable, adjustable walls add openness which can affect creativeness. It gives areas for all types of group work, and can give a place for the student to have an “alone spot”, where he can solo his work and thoughts.

For students to learn to be useful as unique and different individuals, and yet relate as equal human beings, we need to organize schools and classrooms horizontally rather than vertically. In a vertical organization difference is used to show status as superior or inferior
beings. Horizontal structure allows the unique student to rise at his own rate, and retain his relationship as a worthwhile person with his peers.

When learning is full of the wonder of discovering – how to read, how to figure – working and play go hand in hand. The children see little difference between work and play. But all learning is not easy. We do not try to create an atmosphere where there is no struggle. In the very process of growth it means that one is moving into the unfamiliar, and will experience a feeling of loss and of pain in leaving his familiar past. But part of teaching is knowing this, and being ready to give support and encouragement. We can lead back into the safety of old patterns, and help him move outward again. We must give him strength to reach his fullest potential.

My philosophy is that learning is a personal exploration and discovery. Adequate persons are well informed. To be an adequate learning person one must discover himself as a person of dignity and integrity. These are learned as a consequence of one's experience with those about him. This is what makes teaching a privilege. This is what makes teaching not only a classroom activity, but life itself. Children learn from their teachers who they are and what they are, while teachers learn the same things from children.

My husband, Paul Dayton, Jr., - our children Paul, Eli, Kate and Betsy – make up our family. An autobiography of me is one of the family. I was the oldest of six in a professor's family – in an age when my physicist father had time to impart to us the wonder of the world we lived in. I was raised feeling the forces of centrifugal force pulling on energy curves; sound, and light, and magnetism touching my ears and eyes and mind with the excitement, beauty and wonder of life. This I have tried to impart again to our children, always blanketed with the security of love, so that as they grew their understanding would engulf all others.

Family togetherness came in part from our need to depend on each other in our work. We built Castle School together in Forest Grove, Oregon. We each had our part to do, and we each knew we were needed to succeed. In converse, we vitalized as individuals in our free time, hiking into Oregon wilderness and discovering the excitement of building individual strengths as you faced a wilderness together! As our children grew older, our free time expanded in scope to include others in our world around us.

One summer we spent as directors of an American Friends Service Committee (Quaker) Work Camp on the Navajo reservation with twenty volunteer college-age youngsters the Navajo people of Crown Point, New Mexico. We were the first outsiders who ever gave time to help them help themselves, and they couldn’t believe it. Together we quarried sand stone and built a community building. We learned each other's ways with our children, and
we saw each other as individuals within a group interacting, and our culture interacting with the strong and independent Navajo culture.

Other Anglos didn’t enter hogans, but our children did, and brought the people out to the community project. Sheep herding, gathering and shaping stone, singing – together – made peoples see together their sameness.

Another summer we directed the Oregon Easter Seal Camp for crippled children, and our four children were counselors for campers from ages six to twenty-five. We slept and ate and lived with these children, changing braces, feeding food, pushing wheel chairs, catching fish, boating, singing and in the end loving every one of them. Our children will never see a handicapped person as anything but a potential friend.

For our last ten years here in Tucson, there has been no year that our home has not been enriched by the presence of some youngsters living with us, giving us new perceptions, widening the frames of reference for all of us. Many of the children have been from different cultural backgrounds. Bob was a rural American, Sandy Lookstwice a Sioux Indian, Josefina a Mexican, China an Argentine and Christine was French. Christine was our AFS student, and our Kate spent a school year in Argentina as an AFS student.

Time sweeps by. After 15 months in Antartica doing research on fish, Paul is now in the University of Washington, teaching and working for his doctorate. Eli is in Columbia Medical school and his wife Dena teaches second grade. Kate is a junior at Pembroke with plans to be a teacher – and Betsy is a senior in high school. Both girls taught Papago Indians in Head Start this summer. The children called them “Teacher”, but they were the ones who learned.

So ends my autobiography. The excitement of life is the seasons of learning together, as the seasons roll, and your children grow.