ROBERT GRIFFIN, WHILE THERE'S TIME (PHILA: XLIBRIS, 2005).

# FIVE: AUTHENTIC TEACHING

In this last essay, I will look at teaching from a different angle than is typically brought to writings about this topic. The focus here isn't going to be on the needs or wants of society or students and how particular teaching approaches line up with that. And I'm not going to be getting into the outcomes or merits of this or that instructional strategy or what I think makes for effective teaching. Those kinds of things have come up in a number of places in the previous essays. What I want to do here is look at teaching from the perspective of *the place it has in the lives of teachers*, whatever ends the teaching seeks to attain, whatever form it takes, however good or bad it is by one standard or another. From the teachers' side, teaching is the work they do. I'll concern myself in this essay with the meaning this work could have within the lives of the people who engage in it. I hope approaching it from this perspective sheds light on teachers and the act of teaching.

In these pages, I speak to the quality of teachers' lives, and since I am a teacher, that includes the quality of my own life. I speak to the quality of others' lives too—this essay doesn't just apply to those in the field of education. That means I speak to the quality of your life, you who are reading this. More than the other five essays, this one is about you and me. And I don't mean just the quality of your and my professional lives. I mean the quality of our lives overall. Teachers are more than the embodiment of a role in the organizational structure of a school. They are unique and distinct individuals. They are their parents' children. They love and play and create homes and raise families. They are brothers and sisters and friends and colleagues and neighbors and members of organizations and communities. They get sick and then get well, and then get sick and die. I want to shine the light on human beings and how teaching affects the richness and worth of their existence. Perhaps in the process of doing that I will also shed light on the way people in general work—and could work—whatever they do to make a living.

I have put together a construct I call *authentic teaching* to get at what teaching might be—and, as I see it, ought to be—for a teacher. This construct describes how I want teaching to fit within the context of my life, and I offer it to you for your consideration, whatever you do for work. Basically, authentic teaching is teaching that contributes to and reflects an *authentic life*, something I will define. Authentic teaching is a somewhat difficult idea to work with, because you can't tell whether someone is teaching authentically by simply watching them teach. Any instructional method could be an example of authentic teaching, and by

the same token any method could be an illustration of inauthentic teaching, to call it that. You also can't tell whether authentic teaching is going on from what students get out of the class or what they think of the class or the teacher. And you can't tell whether teaching is authentic by the assessments of colleagues or supervisors of a teacher's performance. Authentic teaching is not referenced in strategies, students, or schools. It can only be observed and measured if we attend to its relation to an authentic life.

Because this way of teaching is such a personal matter, related to the entirety of a person's life, very often the only person who will ever know for sure whether teaching is authentic is the teacher himself or herself. But even if no one else ever knows or acknowledges authentic teaching, it is still a very important consideration because it has to do with the direction a teacher's life takes, and that matters because that person matters. That person, that teacher, is not sacrificial to something greater or more important, whether it be students or society or anybody or anything else. The well-being of the teachers themselves is justification enough for a concern with this idea of authentic teaching. Although then again, what I am calling authentic teaching may well be something schools, students, and this society very much need more of right now, because it is simply good teaching.

Since authentic teaching is embedded in, an aspect of, something larger—an authentic life—I will start by sketching out what I mean by an authentic life. From there, I will discuss various dimensions of authentic teaching. I hope by the end of this you will have a grasp of what I am trying to get at with this.

## AN AUTHENTIC LIFE

What is an authentic life? It is an ideal for individuals to move themselves toward over the course of their lives. An authentic life is the realization of one's full humanity. It is a life-long individual project of sorts: to become the truest, finest, most harmonious and complete version of oneself. In contrast to an authentic life are lives characterized by alienation, reaction, artificiality, mindlessness, discordance, and cliché. This view of life underscores your and my potential for taking charge of our lives amid all of the forces—both external to us and within ourselves—that would mold us into something contrary to who we really are and less than what we could actually be. This perspective holds up the challenge to you and me, to everyone, to take responsibility—now, and next year and next year and the next—for the validity and measure of our being.[1]

This project of approximating an authentic life involves a tension and interplay between two processes. It is difficult, if not impossible, to know where

one of these two processes leaves off and the other one picks up. On the one hand, this orientation holds that each of us has a given nature: qualities, aspects, tendencies, that are inherent to us as human beings and as individuals. I think of such things as our physicality, cognitive capacities, and—likely, at least to some extent, and probably more than we think—sexuality, personality, manner, and drives or predilections. In these areas, it is as if we are *gardeners* tending to ourselves, nurturing the unique rosebud that we are into the most beautiful rose possible. The task is to grow a rose and not a orchid or a violet, because we are a rose, that is the flower we are. And more than that, we are a *particular rose*. Our challenge during the time we are granted on earth is to *become* that rose.

But on the other hand this orientation also holds that in a number of crucial areas of our being we can *define* ourselves. To a great extent, we don't have to just nurture what is already there, we can create ourselves. To continue the use of metaphors, it is as if rather than being gardeners we are *sculptors* who can shape ourselves. I think of such areas as our beliefs and values, our philosophy of life, our spiritual or religious commitments and practices, our character, our morality, our goals, our capabilities, and our actions in the world. We have the *choice* to control those aspect of ourselves. And we have the *responsibility* to mold them into a configuration that we are deeply proud of.

Through our inherent powers of observation, reason, decision, and volition or willfulness, we undertake the project of becoming and defining ourselves. It is an artist's endeavor—the art of gardening, the art of sculpting. The end product is a balanced life, where all the pieces fit, where each dimension of our being complements and contributes to the others. It is an existence where it all comes together into a meaningful and personally satisfying pattern: heritage, home, family, friendship, community, play, solitude, and work. This harmony, grounded in who we are and what we freely and reflectively choose to be, is an authentic life. Teaching, or whatever you do for work, is an element within this integrated totality and serves this larger whole, and it can only be assessed in light of this larger and more fundamental reality.

## TEACHING AS AN OCCASION FOR SELF-DEVELOPMENT

Authentic teaching is teaching in a way that contributes to the *teacher's* growth and self-definition. To authentic teachers, every situation in life is viewed as an opportunity to work on the project of coming to their full humanity, and the classroom is no exception. For authentic teachers, every class is undertaken with a sense of personal discovery and expansion. For them, teaching is related to

their own authenticity—becoming clearer, stronger, more focused, more directed, more effective, more themselves.

Too often elementary and secondary schools are places where teachers stagnate, or even regress, as human beings. It may seem ironic that living day after day, year after year in a setting designed to uplift people can have such a leveling, deadening, compromising effect on teachers. But it is a fact of life that resonating with where young students are, and need to be, in their lives doesn't, in itself, boost teachers along their paths to authentic lives. Life in classrooms may make teachers more understanding, caring, giving, and technically competent at their craft, and that is fine as far as it goes. But the question here is whether work in schools helps teachers flower as total human beings.

Twenty or thirty years of teaching cannot be counted on to expand teachers. An indication of this is how it is commonly assumed that thirty-year veterans of teaching are *worse*, not better, than those with fewer years of experience in the field. And not just worse as teachers, that is to say, not as up on the latest instructional strategies and curricular approaches and so on. More than that, there is the presumption that long-time teachers are going to be less vital, evolved, and engaged as *people*. There isn't the perception that their years in the school setting enriched veteran teachers; just the opposite. And to the extent that this is in fact the case, it isn't only an issue for teachers. Students have a big stake in what happens to teachers, because they have to cope with the sorts of people who teach them.

To the extent that schools don't contribute to their own development as people, teachers have to bear major responsibility. Understandably, teachers have been focused on the well-being of students, and this is to their credit. However, teachers have let this concern for students detract them from giving enough attention to their own status as people. The challenge for teachers is to maintain their commitment to students, and add to that an equally strong commitment to their own growth. One thing that will encourage them to go that route will be their recognition of the interrelationship between these two commitments: that is, the realization that the closer they come to authenticity in their own lives, the better they will be for students to be around.

How might this happen? As a start, teachers can talk more with each other and with administrators about much the school and their work promotes an authentic life, or whatever they want to call it. How are *we*? What are *we* becoming here? How can we make this be a richer environment for ourselves without making it less rich for students? They can identify ways to move forward with this concern: inservice days that center on their development, scheduled lunch table idea-sharing sessions, using the authentic life construct as a criterion for

selecting graduate courses and programs, pairing up to help each other grow and gain greater integrity as people, and so on.

Even as they engage in collective efforts, however, teachers will need to come to grips with the fact that while these measures may be helpful, given the nature of the school—which is not different from most work settings—in the end it is likely to come down to individual teachers confronting this challenge on their own. It might be a matter of writing curriculum for *themselves* as well as students. When drawing up their plans for the class, teachers can ask themselves: What do *I* need to learn here? What do *I* need to work on during this next period of time? What books should *I* read? What assignment should *I* take on? And then they can do that and see what comes out of it, and then take the next step from there. However teachers go about it, everything begins with the attitude that the class is going to be a good place for my students *and* me.

## TEACHING AS SELF-EXPRESSION

Authentic teaching is *self-expressive* teaching. It is teaching that reflects the outer frontier of what you have become in your life. It is teaching in a way that makes you seen and heard and felt as the person you truly are. It displays the upper limit of your capability at this point in your development. It manifests your most profound insights, your highest values, your most deeply felt commitments. Authentic teaching says to students, and to yourself, this is what I choose to create, this is the effect I seek to have, this is how far I have come, this is where I am going. This is not to say that no one has ever taught this way before, or that what you are doing isn't an accepted or standard teaching practice; it very well may be that. But it is saying that, whatever else it is, the way you teach expresses your uniqueness, your specialness, as a human being and as a professional. Whatever your teaching approach, it reveals the best that is in you. It may not be exemplary teaching judged by the accepted standard in the field, or by your own standard—not at this point, and you may never achieve that—but it does present to the world what is truest and finest that is in you right now. It is responsible teaching in that sense.

This aspect of authentic teaching—that it is self-expressive in the way I have outlined—prompts teachers to ask certain questions of themselves: Do I know enough about the teaching strategy I am using—the philosophy behind it, its strengths and limitations, its consequences, the alternatives to it—to make a truly informed choice of whether to employ it or not? Have I actually chosen this from thought-through options, or is this something that has been imposed

on me or that I am doing because I was told it was the thing to do, or that I have adopted without much reflection because I knew about it and it seemed to work for other people and I really didn't know what else to do? What—specifically—would I do if I did what I truly believed in doing, and why don't I teach that way? Have I worked hard enough on myself to get to the point where I can teach with integrity—honestly, in alignment with my highest values? Have I worked hard enough on my capability and character so that I can attain the pride and satisfaction that comes from knowing that I have been fully responsible to myself and this teaching circumstance? What do I have to do next—and next and next after that—to become myself at my very best as a teacher?

## AUTOTELIC ENGAGEMENT

Social scientist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in his book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimum Experience* discusses a way of engaging the world he refers to as *autotelic*.[2] Csikszentmihalyi's concept is useful in this discussion of authentic teaching. Authentic teachers engage their work autotelically. Or at least in the way I use the term they do; with apologies to Csikszentmihalyi, I will be twisting and turning his concept to suit my purposes here. One example of where I depart from Csikszentihalyi, he emphasizes doing something for its own reward and not being focused on the results it will achieve. While there is that in authentic teaching, more there an emphasis on goal-directed action, the goal in this case being the creation and expression of an authentic life. For a "purer" consideration of this idea you will need to refer to Csikszentihalyi's book.[3]

The term autotelic refers to self-generated (auto) goals or ends (telos or telic). Autotelic engagement in the act of teaching is directed by purposes that emerge from within the teacher himself or herself rather than external influences. The goals are clear to the teacher and are viewed positively as personal challenges. What others might perceive as threats are seen as stimulating, even enjoyable, challenges, and thus inner harmony or equilibrium is unthreatened and sustained. Goals lead the teacher to a plan of action, which includes ways of gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to implement the plan. All of this is done self-consciously: the teacher is fully aware that these goals were chosen autonomously after careful consideration. This awareness makes a significant difference in how, in this case, the teacher feels and acts. Says Csikszentihalyi:

> What she does is not random, nor is it the result of outside determining forces. This fact results in two seemingly opposite outcomes. On the one

> hand, having a feeling of ownership of her decisions, the person is more dedicated to her goals. Her actions are reliable and internally controlled. On the other hand, knowing them to be her own, she can more easily modify her goals whenever the reasons for preserving them no longer make sense. In that respect, autotelic behavior is both more consistent and more flexible.[4]

This is a teacher who is committed and focused without being locked in or dogmatic.

To be autotelic is to be *immersed* in what you are doing. It is doing something with all of yourself, with total investment, rather than simply going through the motions. There is total personal involvement in the activity. You are fully there, in this moment, not looking over people's shoulders to see what else there is, or distracted by what is coming up next. Whatever the action, it is taken with care, carefully—care-fully, full of care. It is like Zen: when you pour a cup of tea (or teach), pour a cup of tea; be there, totally embrace that action, honor it, complete it. This sort of immersion requires sustained *concentration*, something we all need to practice after so much conditioning by the choppy, disparate, this-and-that, interruptive world we live in.

And last, autotelic engagement is *enjoyed* action. That is not to say that it is always experienced as pleasurable or fun. Indeed, it may be serious business and tough, hard, even tedious, work. But still, it is done with a lightness, delight, aliveness, gratefulness, spirit—*joy*.

## INDEPENDENCE

Over the years, the field of education has been characterized by a series of "right ways" to teach. The word comes down to teachers in the field as well as those in training that things have been figured out. The method, whatever-it-is, has worked effectively someplace; plus it is the ethical way to proceed. Really, it's *the* way to go, no question about it, so just learn the technique and start using it, get on board. These "right ways" carry with them a "have-to" message to teachers—teachers feel pushed, compelled, pressured to affirm and use them. It gets through that you really aren't on the inside, in the know, and playing on the right team if you don't adopt whatever the particular approach is that's in vogue. Thus the question isn't whether the approach is any good. It is, that has already been resolved. The question is whether you have the wherewithal to implement it effectively.

Over the course of my career, there has been a host of such "right ways." Some of them: There was the idea of teaching the structures, as they were called,

of the academic disciplines to students; that is what you had to do. There was the British primary school method; that was the one. There was values clarification. And critical thinking. And constructivist learning. And cooperative learning. And discovery learning. And "effective schools." And whole language instruction. And minimum competencies. And mastery learning. And project learning. And effective teaching. And developmental responsiveness. And theme-based curriculum. And, more recently, multicultural curricula, multiple intelligence-based approaches, authentic evaluation, outcomes-based education, teacher teaming, multi-age classrooms, and standards-based teaching.

It may seem that I am disparaging the approaches in the above list. Not at all. I think there are some very defensible teaching methods in that series. My point doesn't have to do with the merits of these arrangements, but rather the "have-to" quality about them, how they have somehow carried with them the notion that if you are going to be on the side of the good guys—where you ought to be, after all—you had best adopt them.

Well, not so fast. Authentic teaching is teaching *your* way, in accordance with your wisdom and not somebody else's. When you teach, *you'll* be the one to decide what is best for you to do. You'll reflect hard on your purposes, and on the needs, possibilities, responsibilities, and challenges in your situation, and decide for yourself how to conduct your professional life. You are not simply a technician or good soldier. You'll use your rational mind and investigate things on your own. The decisions you reach will be yours and not what somebody told you were best or that you had to do. Authentic teachers teach in the way they believe in, not in the way they are supposed to according to the fashion of the day. Which is not to say they always go against the grain. It is to say, however, that they have thought matters through for themselves and are ready to stand up to those who don't approve of the conclusions they reach.

To provide a better sense of what I am talking about, I will describe three departures from the current conventional wisdom about teaching that I have determined are right for me personally. As I go through these three, keep in mind that I am not contending that the road I have taken is the way to go to be an authentic teacher. Someone could be an authentic teacher and do just the opposite of what I do in these areas. And one last thing, I can imagine times when I would act inconsistently with what I will describe because the situation called for it. But I will do my best to keep the frequency with which that happens down.

Until quite recently, I just assumed that in order to really care about students and be legitimate as a teacher I had to be heavily invested in motivating students.

The way I thought it had to go, students' attitude was my responsibility, and if it stayed negative it was an indication that I wasn't up to it as a teacher. I unquestioningly accepted the idea that I was supposed to take it upon myself to turn students around who were indifferent, reluctant, or even hostile to what my classes were about. In short order, my students would love the subject (and me) and be enthusiastically studying the material. Perhaps I could afford one or two who didn't come around, but then again even one unmotivated student was a black mark on my record. What was my problem that I couldn't bring him around? From the earliest days of teacher training I bought into being Mr. Motivator as a part of my job description and saw my success in this regard as being a prime indicator of my worth as a teacher.

It is not important in this context to go into all of my reasoning, but I have decided that I really am not doing myself or my students any good by being in the motivation business and that I am getting out of it, letting it go—or at least letting go of the way I used to assume I had to come at it. I will be responsible *to* students but not *for* them. They are responsible for themselves. I will establish the richest opportunity I can for students to learn important things, and maturely I hope, invite them to take advantage of it. I will support them in the best way I can if they decide to do that. I will give honest feedback and evaluation to students: no phony praise, no gift grades. If students want to learn how to get motivated when they aren't, I will do my best to teach them. I will try to be a model of someone who is motivated to learn and do something with his life. I will let students know that it matters to me that they use the course to move themselves forward because I want them to be happy and successful in their lives, and I will let them know that I notice it when they do that, and that it gives me satisfaction because I feel good about what is happening with them. If all this adds up to being a motivator after all—and I guess it does—so be it. But it still feels very different to me than the load I used to think I had to carry in the classroom.

I am also shucking some have-to's around my professional persona. I'm simplifying here for the sake of brevity, but, basically, it came through to me over the years that there were a couple of acceptable ways to present myself as a teacher. One was as a kind, caring, somewhat servile, nice guy. Warm, understanding, I'm always available, come to my office or call me anytime. That's one persona. The other one was as formidable and dazzling person par excellence. Sharp, knows it all, master of verbal sparring, will put you in your place like that. Controls any situation with the sheer force of his vibrancy, wit, and entertaining personality.

Again, this is not the place to go into the details of my thinking, but the generalization is that even if I were up to pulling either of those two styles off—which I'm not, really—neither one of them reflects who I am at my core. I've decided that instead of one of those two ways of presenting myself, I want to simply *level* with students as the person I am. To level with someone is to connect with them, look them in the eye, and calmly and as a self-regarding adult relay to them what is on your mind. It isn't trying to impress, in this case, students or win them over. It isn't insistent. It isn't pleading with students to do something or another. It isn't placating them or bidding for their approval or putting on a show for them. It is simply sharing what's so for you. After an adult life of playing teacher, I am working on communicating authentically with students—and colleagues as well—which for me means coming off my act and leveling with them.

My third departure from the conventional wisdom relates to the major emphasis in education these years on working in groups. Particularly at the middle grades level, although it pervades the field, teachers are encouraged to work together in teams, planning their classes together and perhaps co-teaching. Students are placed in this group and that one to take on some shared assignment. Teachers collaborate on the curriculum reform effort. And so on. If you are in education, the message comes through loud and clear that it is better to work collectively than alone: it is more productive, more democratic, less elitist, and, really, this is what you should want to do, be prepared to do, support, and do. The "right answer" in education currently is to affirm enthusiastically, "Oh yes, I want to be on the team!"

Well, I have gotten to the point where I am willing to announce that I don't necessarily want to be on the team. I think there are places for joint efforts in schools and other settings. They can be useful ways to accomplish some things. And I can understand that for many people it can be both a productive and personally rewarding way of working. It is just that, for the most part, being a member of the team is not for me. I have concluded that I am not much of a team player. Rather, I tend to be an individualist who works alone to create my vision as exactly as I am able to (this book being an example). I am also a *selective collaborator*. I will seek out others to work with whose goals and values I share and whose talent and drive I respect. I am particularly averse to being told with whom I must work. Too often in groups formed on the basis of compulsion or assignment I find myself draining my energy debating over ends and means, being distracted from what I ought to be doing, doing things I don't quite

believe in, and going at a far slower pace than I'd prefer to. I am comfortable having the posture I do around group activity and teams, and my message to others who are facing pressure to embed themselves in the collective effort is that it is OK to assert your own way of getting things done.

## SELF-CONTROL

There is much talk in education about controlling students: getting them to engage the material and refrain from disrupting the class and so on. Of course that is a legitimate area of concern. But relative to being an authentic teacher, what is most important is that you achieve control of *yourself*. Many teachers are better at controlling students than they are at controlling themselves and it hurts their capacity for teaching authentically. There are two dimensions of self-control that I think are central: controlling one's *actions*, and controlling the *content of one's consciousness*.

A few years ago I wrote a professional article about Arnold Schwarzenegger.[5] In the piece, I focused on how Schwarzenegger confronted a personal limitation back in his body-building days. For those readers who only know Arnold from his action films and, more recently, political career, when he was younger he was the best body builder around, winning six consecutive Mr. Olympia titles. It turns out that Arnold's waist was not as defined, as muscular, as his competitors'. I grant that in the wider scheme of things Arnold's waist problem is not of overriding import, but I thought the way he dealt with it could provide guidance to others—especially to students, but also to their teachers. We all have weaknesses and confront the issue of how to handle them.

One thing I found noteworthy was how Schwarzenegger had virtually total control over his own behavior, and how that served him well in taking on his waist problem as well as other things in his life. When Arnold decided to do something—some exercises or a nutritional regimen, whatever it was—he *did* it, period. He could count on himself to do what he set out to do. He wasn't omnipotent; he couldn't guarantee good results from what he did. But he could see how it went, learn from that, and then, if need be, revise his program and take the next step. So often in life, it isn't that we don't know what to do. We know what to do, or at least we have identified something to do that is worth trying. But we don't do it. Something comes up—something in the external world, some occurrence, or something inside ourselves, some thought or feeling or impulse—and we don't do what makes the most sense to us to do.

And we aren't happy about that. A surefire way to make yourself miserable is to make plans, tell yourself you are going to implement them, and then not carry them out. We are an audience to ourselves, and we've just put on a bad show for ourselves to watch. Plus we are stuck in the same place we were before in relation to whatever the problem was. If we would have done what seemed reasonable to do we would have either gotten the benefit of what resulted from it, or something to learn from if it didn't work. In fact, things are even worse than before, because in addition to paying the price for the problem or weakness we have, we are now also living with the frustration and self-diminishment that comes out of not being able to get ourselves to do what we set out for ourselves to do.

Clearly, nobody is going to be able to teach authentically if they can't count on themselves to act in accordance with their best judgment. How do you achieve control of your behavior if, in too many instances, you don't have it? I think you do it the same way you achieve any other capability in life: you *practice*. Everyday living gives you innumerable opportunities to practice self-control. If you tell yourself you are going to do something—watch television from 8:00 to 9:00 tonight and that's it, whatever it is—do it, stay with what you said you were going to do. If something comes up that tries to pull you away from the agreement you made with yourself earlier, note was it is. It might be some event, or an emotion, or a memory or thought, or a physical sensation, or you might sort of blank out, go on automatic pilot as it were. Whatever it is, monitor it; learn the kinds of things that try to pull you astray. But no matter what, do what you told yourself you were going to do: watch television for the hour and then turn the set off!

In the process of all this, identify that part of you that can observe the things going on around you and inside you and act autonomously in the face of all that. The late Italian psychologist Roberto Assagioli had a term for this part. He called it the *conscious self*.[6] It is the core *you* that is separate from your thoughts and feelings and impulses and can take charge of your choices and actions. Right now, try something, if you would: Count to five and then lift this book up. Hold it in the air for a few seconds and then, when you decide it is the right time, set it back down. As you do that, experience exactly what it is in you that wills that action and carries it out. *Feel* that part of you, *be* with it. That is the conscious self. That is the part of you that can take control when everything else outside of you and inside you is saying, "Do it my way."

Every time students or other faculty, or things inside yourself try to push you off of authentic teaching, that is a chance to practice putting *you*—the

conscious self—in the driver's seat. Keep practicing, and over time you'll get better and better at it.

In addition to controlling one's behavior, there is achieving control of one's *inner life*—mastering subjective experience. A key authentic teaching method, to put it those terms, is the ability to *control the contents of one's consciousness*. At the heart of the challenge to acquire that capability is breaking the deterministic bond between what happens outside of you and what happens inside you.[7] This is a particularly useful capability to develop as a teacher because there is so much negativity in this field. There are the conflicts with students, other faculty, and administrators. Teachers and schools are continually being criticized publicly for not being up to it. As a teacher, if you don't do things the way other people—students particularly—like it, you hear about it fast and hard. It is very important to realize that if students don't like the class or you, or faculty disapprove of you, or yet another politician or journalist decries the state of the schools, or the lesson you had such high hopes for doesn't go well, you don't absolutely *have* to be upset, think less of yourself, or plot how to win people over or get back at them. Really, you don't *have* to react internally in any way at all.

So much is at stake in a gaining this internal freedom, because if you play your life to the approval and rewards of others because you need that to feel OK inside, you end up selling out your own integrity as a teacher. How to achieve this control of inner consciousness? I can think of four ways:

First, be *purposeful*. If you have goals you firmly believe in that guide you, you are less susceptible to the crap, to put it bluntly, going on around you. When I hear people, educators and others, complaining or getting down about something or another going on at work, I find myself looking for whether they are pursuing goals in that context that grow out of their most deeply held values. Purposefulness is a powerful buffer against the "slings and arrows" that are part of practically everyone's work life, whether it is in teaching or some other field.

When someone or something gets you down, ask yourself, "Do I have specific things that I am trying to get done in this situation that matter greatly to me?" If the answer is no. it may be that your task is not so much straightening out the situation or other people—which may well be beyond your capacity anyway—as it is to identify goals that reflect the core of your being.

Another method of controlling your inner life: engaging in *self-talk*. One thing I have noticed is the tendency of our minds to mirror the world. The world says you

are out of step, and your mind goes along. "You are out of step," it echoes, even if that is the last thing you need to hear. And you feel bad as a consequence, since feelings are largely a byproduct of thoughts. We could speculate why so many people have a propensity to buy into the messages they get from the outside world, join the chorus, pile it on themselves, but in this context let's get right to how to fight back against that self-limiting process. And that is by systematically adding your own silent internal talk to the mix. In addition to that you may want to write things down, in a journal perhaps. However you do it, mediate the exchange between you and the world by forcefully interjecting your own commentary on what is going on. Don't allow to exist uncontested whatever happens to pop up inside you in reaction to what is going on around you.

Keep reminding yourself of what you are doing and why. Praise yourself for being true to yourself. Tell yourself to look for ways to make a "gift of the hit," take advantage of what is going on, learn from it, use it to make yourself even truer to who you are, more resolute, more efficacious, and more moral. Remind yourself that you don't have to "wear" any of the stuff coming at you—you don't have to internalize it, reciprocate in kind, play some identity or role into which you have been slotted, expend effort in that direction, or even acknowledge it. And tell yourself, too, that if whatever-it-is stays right in your face, as it were, you have the right to push it aside so that you can stay on your course in life.

A third way to control inner consciousness is to adopt a *positive mental attitude*. Back to Schwarzenegger, he considers his positive mental attitude to have contributed greatly to his success and happiness. He sees this posture as something he could choose, rather than being solely an attitude he was born with or a product of his circumstance in life. To be sure, there are many "in the know" who scoff at what they consider to be anything as simplistic and naive as a positive mental attitude. But don't we see evidence of its consequences all around us? We all know people who see the negative side of just about everything no matter what anyone might tell them to the contrary? And these people stay unhappy and firmly mired in their lives, don't they? And then there are others we know, who are in no better situations than the first bunch, who find something positive to think and do. And they end up far happier and more productive as a result, isn't that so?

Contrary to what some may assume, a positive mental attitude doesn't mean you have to ignore or distort reality or live in a dream world. You can be as rigorously objective and realistic as it is possible for you to be, but you use these processes to find good ways to be and act while others use them to find good

reasons for inner upheaval, hopelessness, gloom, or counterproductive or dishonoring (to oneself) conduct.

A fourth way to control inner life is through the practice of *meditation*. Meditation can take many forms. What they all come down to is taking some time to get some distance from all that is going on—external circumstances and activities, the internal clutter of thoughts/feelings/sensations/urges—and re-connect with yourself. There are many forms of meditation, and with a bit of effort you can learn about them. One good way to meditate is to simply let everything else go and attend to your breath as it naturally goes in and out. Even a few minutes of this will calm and center you and bring clarity and a sense of personal autonomy—so helpful to being an authentic teacher.

## PHYSICAL HEALTH

We are bio-chemical organisms. Everything we think and do and feel is rooted in our physical being. If we are going to be fully ourselves and teach authentically, we must nurture the physical part of ourselves. So many people—children as well as adults, educators along with those in other fields—look deadened and half sick, overweight or gaunt, and slogging through the day. They are handicapped, less vital and resilient and powerful than they could be if they were physically healthy. Simply, life is uphill if we aren't physically well. That should be an obvious point, but the way many conduct their lives it appears that it is a point that needs to be reiterated. If one is to become an authentic teacher, there is no more crucial teaching method, to call it that, to acquire than good physical health.

We can attend to our own health, take responsibility for it, and work with the medical profession to prevent ill health and combat it when it does occur. There is exercise and good nutrition and proper rest, and most people know what that involves, or if they don't know they can learn about it easily enough. The real issue for most people isn't that they don't know enough; rather it that they don't *play by their rules* in the area of their health. There are rules that each of us must play by to be at our best physically, rules we can't violate and expect to get away with it. The problem is that for a variety of reasons we don't follow our health rules. Consuming excessive amounts of caffeine, sugar, fat, and alcohol—and just plain overeating—violate the rules, nobody has to tell us that. But what we have to deal with is the fact that these rules transgressions result in some very real short-run payoffs to us. They boost our spirits, distract us from

what is unpleasant, or structure our time—for twenty minutes anyway, perhaps even longer. However trapped or tired or preoccupied we are, however cut off from what we should be doing with our lives and what we really need, oral pleasure is the one thing always available to us. There's always a Butterfinger or Budweiser right at hand to make it all a little better for a while. Our mind and feelings are so persuasive: Go ahead, they say, have that third drink or that fourth donut. It's all you have right now, the only pleasure that's possible, the only thing that will bring relief, the only thing that will make things better. The same kind of thing holds true with drugs: the mind/body calls out, be good to yourself, indulge, everything will be OK this time. But of course it doesn't turn out to be OK, and you knew all along it wouldn't. Ultimately, and it's sooner than later, your body lets us know that you didn't play by your rules—its called depression, fatigue, anxiety, nervousness, lethargy, inactivity, obesity, negativity, self-disdain, guilt, or just plain unhappiness.[8]

So many people treat their cars better than they treat their own bodies. But when our bodies give out, unlike with cars, we can't trade them in or junk them. We have to just keep puttering along. It tough to teach authentically with going on.

## PHILIPPE PETIT

In the early morning of August 7th, 1974, a twenty-four-year old Frenchman named Philippe Petit was at the top of one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, one thousand three hundred and fifty feet—one-quarter mile—above the streets of Manhattan. Earlier that morning, a colleague of Petit's shot an arrow with a line attached from the North to the South Tower where Petit was, a distance of one hundred and forty feet. Petit used the line to haul a thin steel cable of five-eighths of an inch in diameter, about the thickness of two pencils, across the gap between the towers and secured it to a steel beam. At 7:15 A.M., Petit wrote his name and the date on the beam, changed into a black sweater, black pants, and leather slippers he stitched himself—and stepped out onto the wire.

Word spread rapidly. "An unbelievable story has just arrived—I don't believe it," one broadcaster said. "Report of a man walking across the World Trade Center buildings on a tightrope!"[9]

Petit stayed on the wire for nearly an hour. He glided back and forth. He lay on the wire. He knelt, bowed, danced, and ran. He sat down and watched a seagull fly beneath him.[10]

Since that time, Petit has walked a high wire many places, including Notre Dame in Paris, the Sydney Harbour Bridge in Australia, and the Little Colorado River in the Grand Canyon here in this country. In early 1997, to the strains of Bach, he glided across a cable at Saint John's Cathedral in New York in honor of its retiring dean, the Very Reverend James Parks Morton.

These weren't daredevil acts, Petit declared, but rather "poetry and art." "And," he added, "it makes me happy, up here in the sky."[11] Petit's art is a profound personal expression, and it is grounded in the highest level of care and craft. A *New Yorker* magazine article on Petit reported:

> Petit has become the greatest tightrope walker in the world. A big factor in his success is the care he puts into rigging the wire. He scrutinizes every aspect of a site, examining blueprints and survey maps, and sometimes photographing the site from the air. Once he has set the stage, and has mentally located the moorings, he calculates the tension the cable needs in order to feel as much as possible like a steel beam underfoot. A two-hundred-foot wire, for example, requires ten tons of tension. Boulders, welded inner staircases, and I-beams make good anchors. So do series of stakes that Petit drives deep in the ground or metal plates that he bolts to concrete floors. Additional stability is provided by guy lines—special manila ropes looped over the cable and tied to other anchors in the gorge, valley, skyscraper, lake, or forest. "There is no place I can't rig," he says.[12]

Petit is uncompromising. He could be a wealthy man if he accepted advertising work. A number of companies have offered him a great deal of money if he would wear their product or display their logo on a high wire walk, but he has turned them down. To make ends meet financially, Petit has performed as a street juggler, and done construction work, which has included gutting buildings, installing plumbing, and chipping paint off of bathtubs. Why not take the advertising money, a friend asked him. "I'd die first," Petit replied, likening such work to selling his soul.[13]

In his book, *On the High Wire*, Petit describes how to walk the wire—which may serve as a metaphor for other work, including teaching. He says there are an infinite number of styles.

> There is the walk that glides, like that of a bullfighter who slowly approaches his adversary, the presence of danger growing with each new step, his body arched outrageously, hypnotized. There is the unbroken, continuous walk,

> without the least concern for balance . . . as if you were looking for your thoughts in the sky; this is the solid walk of a man of the earth returning home, a tool over his shoulder, satisfied with his day's work. These walks happen to be mine. Discover your own. Work on them until they are perfect.[14]

"The wire walker of great heights, is a dreamer," Petit writes. "He stretches out on his cable and contemplates the sky. There he gathers his strength, recovers the serenity he may have lost, regains his courage and his faith."[15]

Petit describes his performance: "I continued to do the best and the most beautiful things I knew. I did the exercises in the order I had prepared them during my practice sessions. I added what a man of the wire thinks he possesses: the expansiveness of movement, the steadiness of eye, the feeling of victory, the humor of gestures. I climbed down from the wire, covered with sweat, unable to remember having once taken a breath."[16]

Says Petit: "Limits, traps, impossibilities are indispensable to me. Every day I go out looking for them."[17]

Petit counsels doing only those moves on the wire that "transfigure you." "I triumph by seeking out the most subtle difficulties."[18]

"Persist," Petit advises, in order to "feel the pride of conquering." Because for the victor, "a red velvet wire will be unrolled for him and he will move along it brandishing his coat of arms."[19]

Could we even dare to think of teaching, our own lives, in such terms?

## MORTALITY, LOVE, AND WORK

Paul Feyerabend was an honored teacher and world-renowned philosopher of science. In his autobiography *Killing Time* Feyerabend recounted his life from a lower middle class childhood in Austria to the height of international academic success.[20] Just after he began writing the last chapter of his book, Feyerabend was diagnosed as having an inoperable brain tumor. He had already entitled the chapter "Fading Away," which, he tells the reader, referred to his *professional* fading away.[21] Now the title assumed a new meaning. At the end of this chapter, his last published words, written shortly before he died, Feyerabend reflected on his work and his love for Grazia Borini, who shared the last ten years of his life as his wife:

> I would not want to die now that I have finally got my act together—in my private as well as my professional life. I would like to stay with Grazia to support her and cheer her up when the business gets hairy (her business).

> After a life of fighting for solitude, I would like to live as part of a family, making my contribution along the way—like having dinner and a few jokes ready when she comes home from work. We might even try to use the most advanced methods of having children, but in the meantime we have to wait for the further development of my illness—not a pleasant position to be in, especially for Grazia, who had high hopes for a new life for us together . . . . The book I promised to her might even have turned out simple and rather luminous—it might have shown how reason and emotion can work together in a "scholarly" production. Grazia is with me in the hospital, which is a great joy, and she fills the room with light. In one way I am ready to depart, despite all the things I would like to do, but in another way I am sad to leave this beautiful world behind, especially Grazia, whom I would like to accompany for a few more years. These may be my last days. We are taking them one at a time. My latest paralysis was the result of some bleeding inside the brain. My concern is that after my departure something remains of me, not papers, not final philosophical declarations, but love. I hope that that will remain and will not be too much affected by the manner of my final departure, which I would like to be peaceful, like a coma, without a death struggle, leaving bad memories behind. Whatever happens now, our small family can live forever—Grazia, me, and our love. That is what I would like to happen, not intellectual survival but the survival of love.[22]

In a postscript, Grazia Borini Feyerabend wrote: "He was breathing slowly, and somehow peacefully. A few seconds later, he simply was not anymore. We were alone, holding hands, and it was midday."[23]

Authentic teaching is teaching with an awareness of life itself, of the wonder of being alive. It is teaching with a physically felt, experienced understanding of how glorious a gift you have been given. It is teaching grounded in the realization that life is but a series of moments—this one, and this one, and now this one—and each must be cherished. At the end of his life Russell Kirk wrote (speaking of himself, as he did, in the third person), "In his seventh decade Kirk had come to note wryly his resemblance to the Little Fir Tree of Hans Christian Andersen's fable—long eager for the coming of some wondrous event, not appreciating that the splendor of life is in the here and now."[24] Don't lose sight of life amid the lesson plans.

The only currency that really matters in life is time. Each of us has just so much of this currency, and we spend it as we do, and when it is gone it cannot

be replenished. Authentic teaching *is* teaching with a sense of mortality, ours as teachers and theirs as students. We are all finite beings; it will end. Of course we know that, but there is that difference between merely knowing something and *really* knowing it. My sister's sudden death—she was killed by a drunk driver on her way to teach her fifth grade class—and my own recent heart attack have brought me closer to really knowing. Far more than I did before, I live with a virtually constant awareness of my own finitude, and rather than it bringing me down as some might suppose it has sensitized me and enriched my life and my teaching. I appreciate the moments more now. I honor them more now. I throw fewer moments away than I did before. I am more responsible to them now that I was. I take them more seriously. And while I am more serious than I was, I am also lighter, more joyous, freer than before. And much more than I did, I feel more connected to others. We are all in this together. I really see that now.

Each moment of life is more sacred to me now than it was, and love is more precious. The writer Andre Dubus, who recently passed away, in his essay, "On Charon's Wharf," said it so beautifully:

> It would be madness to try to live so intensely as lovers that every word and every gesture between us was a sacrament, a pure sign that our love exists despite and perhaps even because of our mortality. But we can do what the priest does, with his morning consecration before entering the routine of his day; what the communicant does in that instant of touch, that quicksong of the flesh, before he goes to work. We can bring our human, distracted love into focus with an act that doesn't need words, an act which dramatizes for us what we are together. The act itself can be anything: five beaten and scrambled eggs, two glasses of wine, running beside each other in rhythm with the pace and breath of the beloved. They are all parts of that loveliest of all sacraments between man and woman, that passionate harmony of flesh whose breath and dance and murmur says: We are, we are, we are . . . [25]

Authentic teaching is grounded in the reality that we *are* and we *love.*

We are and we love . . . and we *work.* As human beings we work. Work, vocation, is at our essence. We create. We make the world different than it was. We leave our mark. For some of us that work is teaching. We need to honor our work, and ourselves.

While there's time.