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*(This is a transcript of an informal address given to a group of teachers.
It was never intended by Professor Schoff that this would be published.)*

I have been standing on that side of the room trying to figure out where I should stand so that I can see all of you, and I must admit that this side of the room makes me think of that line from Gilbert and Sullivan, "She doesn't look a day over 42 in the dust with the light behind her." A lot of you are silhouettes, so if I fail to make eye contact, it is because I can only see your seat. When Trudy called me, I said, "Nobody will get up at 8 o'clock in the morning the week before school starts," and I have to let you know that this is not my best hour. I am a night person. I am not famous for mental acuity; I am not even famous for being conscious at this hour. My children know that if they want anything, if they ask me before 6, I will give it to them if they will just go away.

I don't know quite how to define teaching. I think the definition of it is a little bit like the definition of research. It is what you are doing when you don't know what you are doing. I have no idea what effect my teaching has had on other people. I think you would have to ask the students who have been in my class, so in getting ready for today, I decided instead to think about what certain teachers have done for me, because I thought maybe I would find in there a nubbin of something that would mean a lot to those who get up and face classrooms.

Trudy mentioned that I had taught at West High for ten years. I have taught at the University for over twice that long, but I have done lots of other kinds of teaching, too-- in church basements, sitting on piano benches, teaching by correspondence people who are in prison, teaching in industry, teaching men with horny hands and tractor caps who were trying to learn how to write better. I have been in lots of teaching situations. I know just from talking to some of you earlier this morning that you are teaching in grade schools, and I hope that the things that I say have meaning no matter where it is that you are teaching. So I decided to talk about some of the great teachers in my life.

One of them was Mrs. White. Mrs. White was my piano teacher from the time that I was in sixth grade until I graduated from college. She was over ninety when she stopped teaching piano. A very tall woman who wore pince-nez on her nose and hooked the glasses on as the lesson began. She was as wrinkled as a prune, but had smooth hands from practicing every day. And when you rang her bell you could sometimes hear her doing her own practicing; when you stepped into that room it was pure music. Everything else stopped. You had to do your exercises. You had to be able to do the scales from C through the six sharps and six flats. You had to be able to do the arpeggios and warmup exercises before you could do the Schubert or the Beethoven or the Chopin. What she taught me was that those fundamentals are absolutely essential, that there are certain things you have to learn to do first before you can move on to the

great things. In fact, if I had to select out one sentence that rings in my head from those days with Mrs. White, it was her looking at me and saying, "Why play page ten when you stumble on page one?" That was an important lesson, and I think it is an important part of teaching. I learned the importance of discipline, of fundamentals, of repetition and of exercise.

It turns out that my son who is here and standing back there in the white shirt had another great teacher that I was able to witness in operation. Maybe some of you have heard of her, she is Marie Endres, a violin teacher here in town who has trained an awful lot of fiddle players. She is so beloved by her students that they all just call her "Teach." One day when Erik was in high school, we went to his lesson, and I went in because I was supposed to play the piano for his lesson on the Bach double violin concerto. If you know Miss Endres, when you are learning the double violin concerto you don't just play part one or part two, you have to be able to play both parts. So the two of them got going, and I sat at the piano bench. They went through it once and Erik played part one; then they went through it a second time and Erik played part two. He looked like he was feeling pretty proud of himself, and she looked at him and said, "You did pretty well except it is not there yet, it is not Bach. How can I say it, Bach just goes - you can't stop." Then she looked at Erik, who even at that age had already developed the Schoff shoulders, he made the violin look rather small, and she said, "You Schoff (she always called her students by their last name), you Schoff, you look so much better than you sound." I thought I was off the hook--I had stumbled through the piano part one way or the other. Then she turned to me and she said, "And you, you have got a very good kid there, and he deserves a better fiddle. I hope you will get him one soon." She was a great teacher. A lot of people who play the fiddle in this town owe a lot to her, and from that lesson I learned that the composer comes first, Bach just goes, and that you can't fake it. You can't look better than you sound and you have to have the right equipment.

Another of my great teachers was a college chemistry teacher, and he was a card-carrying eccentric if there ever was one. He had sort of a snuffling manner when he talked but, oh, did he know chemistry. When he got up and started spitting out the organic symbols, I can still see where hexamethylenetetramine was on the board and how it looked in his handwriting. He managed to relieve it all with humor and make it ultimately serious at the same time. I remember running up to him after I made a mistake on an exam with a formula in biochemistry for a drug and I said "Dr. Trytten I got the decimal point in the wrong place, can I change it?" He just put his hand over the paper and he said, "Sorry, the patient is already dead." He was also the sort who would snuffle back and forth through the chemical equations, had lots of jewel-like phrases like, "Well now let's take the bull by the tail and look this thing squarely in the face." For the women in his class, and there were only two back in those days (it was mostly men in chemistry) he managed to keep things lively by giving me for my unknown in organic chemistry, butyric acid. I don't know if you know what butyric acid is, but it is the main ingredient in rancid butter. When you get it on your skin, you smell like you have slept in the pig barn for weeks. Everyone thought it was a wonderful joke.

The most important teacher of my life was my mother. She was one of twelve children, from an immigrant family that was convinced that education and learning was the way that you took possession of this country. Seven of the twelve, at one time in their lives or another, were teachers. So I grew up in a family where word games and mathematical puzzles and getting your grammar corrected were a part of daily life. The best used books in our house were the dictionary, the encyclopedias, and the World Atlas. The instruction that went with them was "look it up." But it wasn't just with books. It was with everything. There was no such thing with mother as a half scrubbed floor or a partly-raked lawn. You weren't finished at the grocery store until you had put the vegetables in the refrigerator, laid the change on the kitchen table, and had given an accounting of what each item cost and why there was that much change coming home from the grocery store. She also was a person that you could not lie to. In fact, if you tried it, you felt like you were standing in your underwear. Most importantly, she despised arrogance and pretention, what she called "getting a big head." I saw her take on someone who was enough of a friend, who knew her well enough, so that he could tolerate it. He was a local whose son was doing pretty well in athletics and the father was getting so that he crowed quite a lot in public. I saw my mother sidle up next to him one Friday night next to a men's clothing store in our downtown, and she just looked at him and said "picking out a new hat?" He looked at her, sort of puzzled, and she said "I thought you were probably shopping for one in the largest size."

What can be gleaned from these stories that I have told you about teachers? Well, I think there are some things that are as simple as the great teaching of Socrates and his pupils sitting on one end of the log or the other. The elements are just two or three, and they work no matter where you are teaching. The first of them is paying attention. Getting the students to pay attention to the teacher, and the teacher paying attention to the students. I am astonished as I walk around the University at the number of teachers who don't seem to care, who are talking to the blackboard, who have people who are slowly falling asleep in the front row over and over again. People are so bored that the teachers are literally talking to themselves without much attention to the fact that the people in front of them aren't listening, that something is askew. Sometimes I think it is just that people become bored with what they are teaching. On the other hand, I have seen many master teachers who can make anything interesting. It doesn't make any difference if they are teaching about fish scales, or rocks, or butterfly wings, or poems. They teach about something and at that moment it is the most interesting thing in the world to them. When something fascinates you, when you believe in it, when you teach that way, it is infectious. Students catch it from you. Some teachers rely on show biz, but show biz only goes so far. The show biz has to be coupled with competence, and that is why I say to teachers who are training under me, "The most important thing for you is to know your subject." Because if you have competence, students will forgive all kinds of personal idiosyncrasies. I never try to make a student teacher be a clone of myself. I always say, "Teach from your strengths, don't worry about the educational philosophy, you will figure out a way if you are interested in it and you want someone else to be interested in it." I also know that we live in an era when getting the students' attention is much harder than it was even 20 or 30 years ago, because attention spans are shrinking all of the time. Everything militates against it. The sound bite, the quick new Nintendo game, the television, the little quick clip, has

made for a very jittery generation of young people whose attention is not easy to focus. These are all the burdens that people have to face in the public school system. I think one of the biggest challenges for people who are teaching is to insist one way or another that people at this moment pay attention. You do whatever you can to get that to happen. I will admit that on occasion I have done things that were spontaneous, I certainly didn't plan them, but they got attention. I think, for example, of a student that I had in high school in a study hall who spent his entire time looking over his shoulder to see if I was watching him while he twanged a bobby pin on the edge of the desk and passed candy bars and generally raised mayhem in the classroom. One day when he looked over his shoulder to see if I was watching him, I was so frustrated that I just stuck my tongue out at him and I had his attention for the rest of the semester. It just about knocked him out of his shoes.

Besides paying attention, I think it is important for teachers to arrive at a shared language, to understand where your students are. You always have to start from there, no matter where that is, and build on it. Then learn at what point you set them free, shove them off the branch and let them go on on their own. One of the ways that you build on where students are is by means of things that mean something to them - analogies, or poetry or whatever. I have heard people explain complicated suction pumps used in ophthalmic surgery with an analogy as simple as, "Well, see, it works sort of like a soda straw." I have heard linking verbs described as being like safety pins or equal signs. I remember Mrs. White demonstrating how to play a scale, and she said, "You play it like shaking it out of your sleeve." You have to be prepared in looking for that common language for the place to stand back and be silent. I think you all know that many, many students escape you simply because you won't wait long enough for them to think. They think, "Well, if I just don't say something, she will ask somebody else and I can escape." The power of the silence, to sit there and wait, to hang on like a bulldog and say "Come on now, what do you think about it?," even though the silence becomes painful--until they can't wiggle away--is a part of the shared language. And then there always comes that point with the good students, when you just have to stand out of their way. There is probably nothing more wonderful than the student that wants it so much, that wants to learn so much, that they get better than you are in some ways, and you have to learn not to get in their way.

The shared vocabulary is very important. You have got to know the names of the parts of the body if you study anatomy, you have got to know the chemical symbols to teach chemistry, you have to know grammar if you are going to write decently. Winston Churchill said that he learned a healthy respect and a love affair with the English language by parsing sentences on the blackboard until his feet bled.

Encourage, but do not give idle praise. One of the trends that I have not liked in education is the tendency to be idly encouraging when the quality isn't there. I have seen people's refrigerators full with children's art work--where they practically are afraid to sneeze if their child had done it. I think it is a good idea to encourage, but at the same time, I think you always have to push with constructive criticism, push to the next level, not equalize everything, whether mediocre or excellent. One of the ways to do this is to choose things which are good, things which have quality. For example, teaching as

long as I have there are many books that I use year after year after year. They stand up to it because they were good in the first place. They are sort of like Cleopatra getting old. You remember Shakespeare said, "Custom cannot whither her nor age stale her infinite variety." If something is good, you can come back to it over and over and over again and it just gets deeper and deeper and deeper. I had ten years ago put two works side by side in a course by some sort of instinct, and it was only this last year that I really understood the connection between them, although I taught it for eight or nine years. All of a sudden I thought, "This is why I put those two things together," and "That is what it means." Because as you know, when you teach something you get to know it in a very different way.

So there is paying attention, there is bringing your students along to a shared language, starting where they are and bringing them up, up, up. And then there is, finally, figuring out whether you have done anything. It is called evaluation. The best evaluation is the one on one. The Miss Endres' and the Mrs. Whites of the world have no doubt, one on one, when a certain level had been reached. When you are teaching one on one, you know about progress because you are monitoring it so closely. Well I am not in that kind of situation now and most of you aren't either. I have 300 students in one class. I have 120 in another class. Most of you, I think, at a minimum probably have 20. How do you measure that? Well then you go to that precarious thing called testing. There are certain kinds of goals. But you all know, too, that there are lots of things that tests don't test, that they don't tell you the whole picture, that there are some students who are test wise and not very wise in other ways. That final element of teaching, of evaluating, is very, very long and sometimes you never know what it is that you have taught. It may be something that you never guess that you taught. Now and then I am invited back to a class reunion. I will have a student come up to me and say, "Remember when you told me . . ." I don't remember, but the student has remembered it and it made a difference. That is where I think the heart of teaching often is. In order to get around these classes of 300 or 120, one of the things that I systematically make my students do is keep a journal. I make them write something every day. There is a lot of rust in the pipes. There is a lot of stuff that is junk, but eventually they develop a voice. They begin to trust themselves. They begin to realize that what is going on in their head has meaning. When I go through those journals there is a lot of garbage, but there are some wonderful nuggets and I can see people getting stronger and stronger in what they think. Since I teach literature and writing I am a great believer in the power of writing. I think writing is one of the ways that you come to know what it is that you think. When you have to run it through a pencil, then you know what it is that you think. It is a habit I have myself. I have written something daily for, I don't know, maybe 30 years. I have yellow pads all over the house because it helps me to keep track of what is going on in my own head.

Well that's what I think goes on in the classroom. I think it is a matter of attention, of a shared language, and it is a matter of trying to arrive at some measure of whether you are moving ahead and whether something is happening.

But when I spoke with Trudy about this talk, I told her that I would also like to talk about not just getting ready for September but something a little bit bigger, which is

getting ready for life. Most students know that there is something outside that classroom. My University students know that when they walk across that graduation platform they are stepping out of one kind of safety straight into a traffic jam where everything that has been learned in all those years of school is suddenly melted together, is suddenly fused. They know that being good in school does not necessarily mean that you are going to be good in life. Certainly, we have ample and abundant evidence of people who are book smart and totally dumb about life. Just as there are illiterate mothers who are very wise in taking care of their children, there are professors who can hardly get across the street on their own. But no matter what grade you are teaching, you are really getting people ready for what Sigmund Freud called the two most important things in anyone's life. That is finding people to love and get along with, and finding work that is worth doing. It starts in kindergarten, the very first moment that a child walks into school.

I think we can learn a lot from people who have told us how they learned not to make a living, but how to make a life. In fact, one of the great joys of teaching literature is the literally thousands of records left by people who at one point or another had a crucial episode in their lives when they saw the connection between what was going on in school and something that was bigger than themselves. Ralph Waldo Emerson had it happen to him when he was a young man standing in Paris looking down into a glass case full of dried ferns. He said, "I realized that the same current that flowed for Socrates and Plato, that current called life itself, flowed for me today and that I had the power to discover it and make it my own." He called it the Doctrine of the Oversoul. Robert Jastrow, a contemporary astronomer, had it happen to him after several decades of studying the stars. Sitting on that little stool looking up at the stars night after night after night (which is bound to make you feel pretty little) looking for the right formula to explain how it all began--he said one night he suddenly came to the conclusion that another decade of formulas and mathematics would not explain the why of the stars. It could explain the how, but not the why. And he said, "If I could think of a metaphor to describe it, it would be that I had spent my professional life scaling the mountains of ignorance, climbing to the top, and I just pulled myself over the level to the top and lo and behold, there was a band of theologians who had been sitting there for centuries looking down at me."

The person on whom I rely so often to give me a sense of when the invisible meets the visible is the poet Thomas Hardy. And that is where I would like to conclude this morning. Thomas Hardy believed that everyone involved in teaching and learning is in a sense involved in trying to hook up to that sense of immensity that lurks in the back of all of us. You know when that light bulb goes on. He used the occasion of the sinking of the ship, the Titanic, as a way of describing it. It is a poem called "The Convergence of the Twain" and in the first half of the poem he describes what it is like to go down through the water and find the Titanic on the bottom of the ocean floor, gently rocking. Sea worms are crawling over the mirrors where the rich and famous had danced in the ballrooms, cold water is threading its way through the furnace rooms where the engines had beat and throbbed. Then he says he realized that for all of the wonderful products of the mind that had created the Titanic, there was something even greater that had created the iceberg. There came a moment, a crucial time when the

iceberg and the ship were brought together in a kind of cataclysmic collision, which he calls the convergence of the twain, and that collision, I think, is the light bulb that ought to be in the back of all teaching and learning. Listen to the end of that poem on the convergence of the twain.

Well: while was fashioning
This creature of cleaving wing,
The Immanent Will that stirs and urges everything

Prepared a sinister mate
For her--so gaily great--
A Shape of Ice, for the time far and dissociate

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

Alien they seemed to be:
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history,

Or sign that they were bent
By paths coincident
On being anon twin halves of one august event,

Till the Spinner of the Years
Said "Now!" And each one hears,
And consummation comes, and jars two hemispheres.

I wish you a good teaching year. I wish you the turning on of light bulbs because it goes on not only in the classroom but all through life, and I hope that somewhere, either coming from a student or sending out to a student, at least once this year, you jar two hemispheres.