

# Teachers: Messengers and Escorts

Categories: Uncategorized

I lived for a number of years in Princeton, New Jersey which, for many years, served as Einstein's last home. I have written here before of his wisdom, but one line of his that has always stuck with me is that he observed that "teachers are messengers from the past and escorts to the future." I found this true throughout my professional life, but even more so in my personal life. My teachers helped me see where mankind in general-and me specificall-had been and where I might go.

We have all had teachers who touched us in profound ways. Often they come in moments that change our life's trajectory. I have called these pivotal moments because they change everything. I remember Mrs. Crum, who in a passing moment, asked me, a student who had barely passed English the year before, if I had ever considered being a writer. Now eight books later and after hundreds of articles, I guess she called it right. I remember Mr. Ball, who knew and used every aphorism and cliché known to mankind. But the reason these sayings are clichés is because they are so true. Even today, when I am having a bad time I hear Mr. Ball in my head, "This too, shall pass." And it does.

Perhaps of all my teachers Mrs. Sang had the most influence. She was the one that let me know that I did not have to limit my future by the height of the hills that surrounded our little school. She let me know that I was supposed to go to college. Both my parents had been what we call today, dropouts (although my father returned to high school at the age of 26 and then later went to college and seminary.) I had struggled with school being viewed, first as a slow student, then as an underachiever, before getting it together in high school, but college wasn't high on my radar until Mrs. Sang stepped in. We had a number of debates about college attendance and finally she won. She even encouraged me to try for Harvard and while I didn't get accepted it remained a distant goal brought closer a decade later when I was accepted there for my doctoral studies.

I ended up at the Ohio State University working on my B.A. which, at over 40,000 students was a bit larger than the small, rural West Virginia high school I had attended. I went from being a big fish in a small pond to a minnow surrounded by sharks and whales.

On a visit home my freshman year I saw Mrs. Sang and she sensed in me my frustration and lack of confidence from being buffeted around in that large ocean. And although her paid teaching of me was over, she continued her influence by writing me a long letter, which I recently uncovered. Time and space does not allow me to share its entire contents, but I will share with you a few of her thoughts.

She said she sensed disappointment in me. Perhaps it was because I wasn't making the As like I had in high school. She reminded me that "It's not the grades that count, it's what you become." She went on to say that grades are the evaluation of one person. She told me she had given me As because I was worth teaching. It wasn't because of my knowledge-it was because I had a mind which should be exposed to the wonderful experiences of learning. She reminded me that in a diamond mine they take out each diamond, grade it, polish it and weigh it. I was simply going through that process of being polished and weighed. But she reminded that even the tiniest diamond sparkles and brings joy to a heart. And now it was up to me to set the weight and the joy I will bring. Unpolished diamonds are sought after only by those who know their inherent value. She reminded me that the challenges I face were merely a result of the

fact that I was being cut and polished. She suggested a steady hand and courage. She then shared a quote that "Courage-an independent spark from Heaven's bright throne, by which the soul stands raised, triumphant, high, alone."

She went on to share a small essay for me to read each day of the week, in which powerful ideas were encapsulated. She shared Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea that "he would be a man must be a nonconformist...What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think...Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." She reminded me that Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes said that, "No man has earned the right to intellectual ambition until he has learned to lay his course by a star which he has never seen-to dig by the diving rod for springs which he may never reach." One of the other thoughts (of the many she wrote out for me in that letter) was Lincoln who said that "Let no one falter, who thinks he is right. It is important, not only to give the right answer, but to stick to it through thick and thin." She went on to share another thought from the great Emancipator that "I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live by the light I have." In reading Lincoln's words I realized he had been able to free others because he had been able to free himself.

Mrs. Sang, like all great teachers didn't see her job ending when I graduated. She continued to serve as a messenger using the words of past great men, to guide and escort me towards my own future. In rereading her letter to the young me, I realized how great her influence had been for me in my life as an educator and leader. I realized she was cutting the diamond so that I could sparkle and bring joy for others in years to come. That is why teaching is truly a noble profession. In a world full of testing and criticism, it is good for all us to remember what our real jobs are.