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All Pleasure, No Drudgery

I can't remember a time when learning something, almost anything, wasn't a challenge and a pleasure. I was fortunate to have parents and other adults around who were patient and happy to answer any question that they could and willing to spend time with me to look up things when they did not have ready answers.

Occasionally, I would get teasing in the guise of information; for instance, Daddy would occasionally warn me to stay out of the rain because, with my turned-up nose, I might drown. But I guess I didn't take him too seriously, for while I didn't like my nose very much, I didn't really think that any rain I'd go out in was going to be heavy enough to drown me. Mother seldom lost patience with my questions about cooking or about household routines. I didn't like my occasional instructions on how to dust our living room furniture a bit more thoroughly, but that dislike came because I found it tedious and not rewarding to dust the small crevices in the sofa and chairs. I accepted the explanation that my hands were smaller and would fit the nooks and crannies better than adult hands, awaiting the time for my little sister to grow responsible enough to take on the intricacies of the furniture. My feeling about that chore resulted in my long-time resolution that I would never have any furniture made of wood in *my* home. I suppose that was a kind of learning, but fortunately I didn't follow through, and I do have some furniture that needs dusting.

Mamie, my grandmother, showed great patience and enjoyment in teaching me to read before I started to school and in helping my stubby fingers manipulate the crochet hook, the knitting needles, and the embroidery needle that I enjoyed watching her use. Although the baby bib I chose to try to embroider was too intricate for me, I didn't mind the botched, too-tight stitches I produced. I guess I was too vain to see how amateurish my needlework was, but years later I discovered that I remembered most of what she had taught me. I've spent many pleasant hours knitting and teaching grandchildren to knit.



I started to school with the potential of being bored because I already knew how to read, but I was fortunate that Miss Irwin, my first-grade teacher, kept me busy with challenging assignments. I was beginning to see the overlap between learning and teaching. Actually, all my teachers, until I encountered Mr. Johnson in high school geometry, kept me interested in learning, as well as the

process of teaching. Mr. Johnson's ineptness in teaching was actually a good thing, for I was so bewildered by geometry that I accepted the fact that he made no sense to me and figured out the textbook on my own. I felt triumphant when, midway through the semester, I finally gained some concept of what axioms and proofs were about. Was I learning or teaching?

I found most of the other high school subjects intriguing, and college demanding and interesting. However, I began to think that teaching must be a terrible bore, since the instructors taught the same subject matter year after year. I enjoyed what my teachers taught me, most of the time, but I thought the repetition of the same ideas and materials must be stultifying for them, so I didn't think that becoming a teacher was at all appealing. That opinion of mine was reinforced by conversations I had with classmates who wanted to be teachers but who found that the subject matter of their education classes often was boring to them and sometimes sounded ludicrous to me. Why should I submit to boring classes in order to prepare myself for an unrewarding career? I learned later that, for most teachers, that conclusion was wrong. Each repeated class was a chance to try new ideas, challenge new students, and evaluate what one was doing.

After World War II, Paul and I went back to school for graduate work when he was invited to become an instructor at our old college. He didn't have the same prejudice against teaching that I did. I tagged along to work on a degree, and we both signed on as instructors, he in mathematics, I in English.

I was often uneasy about how to present my ideas in the classroom, although we did receive some orientation and assistance from senior professors. The crunch of keeping up instructional goals for a greatly enlarged population of students taking advantage of the G.I. Bill was a challenge to the conscientious senior faculty, a challenge which they met astonishingly well. I disagreed with some of the rigid ideas the faculty had, but didn't see why those ideas could not be modified. Our goals in teaching were interesting and challenging, but I often had the feeling that as a teacher I was, at best, mediocre. Nevertheless, I continued to teach when we went to Chapel Hill for Paul to begin work on his doctorate. I became very much interested in my students and what I saw as the regional differences in students in Texas and North Carolina, as well as the content of the grammar, composition, and literature classes I was assigned to teach. For instance, North Carolina students tended to spell *library* the way they pronounced it -- that is *libry* -- whereas Texas students were apt to spell it *liberry* as *they* heard it. The Carolina students enjoyed reading "Look Homeward Angel" because many of their fathers had known Thomas Wolfe in school, whereas many Texas students didn't find the book at all stimulating. Despite my growing interest in *how* to teach, I still was afraid that I didn't want to teach on a long-term basis. I valued the importance of learning too highly to be content with not teaching well enough for students to learn.

During the years Paul taught at Southern Methodist University and I became a stay-at-home mom with two active sons, I reviewed my dormant teaching career, read a great deal about the interesting changes in teaching English happening in education around the country, including delightful growing fields in linguistics and English as a Second Language. I decided that the teaching profession was dynamic and needn't be the dead end I had thought it was. I did a bit of tutoring and experimenting with teaching methods with my children. The result was that I began to refine my thoughts about what I wanted to do when "I grew up." Perhaps I should look into teaching as a profession.

I had a chance to test my new ideas when the English Department at SMU became desperate for an extra instructor to cover an unanticipated growth in the number of students. Both children were in school, so I accepted the offer to teach. To my surprise, I instantly gained stature in my sons' eyes. It was hard work to stay ahead of my classes, but I found teaching endlessly stimulating. I wanted to be a teacher, after all.

At J. Sargeant Reynolds and Virginia Commonwealth University, I discovered the exhilaration of preparing classes and working with students and, importantly, colleagues. The challenges of guiding students in learning basics of writing and reading and discussing literature proved to be endlessly exciting and thought-provoking. There was only one real downside to teaching: the endless papers to read and grade. At the same time, that "homework" was a learning process in itself, not only for the students but also for the instructor. It was nevertheless a liability, and sometimes even a colossal bore. After I retired from VCU, I continued tutoring and teaching, and, especially during my literacy instruction in the state prison system, kept discovering intriguing ways of interacting with students of all kinds. The people in my classes were a constant challenge to keep interested and receptive to learning. Consequently, when someone from the Shepherd's Center asked me to teach a class in writing memoirs, I accepted.

Then some kind of reality set in. I'd never taught such a class; why did I think I could handle a new subject? My fears grew while I waited for my class to begin. With many doubts about my ability to handle memoir writing, I walked into my first class and found a group of intelligent people who knew and enjoyed each other. Even worse, I discovered that many of them had been in memoir writing classes taught by a predecessor, no longer teaching. If I had been closer to the door, I might have fled at that moment. I had an almost scholarly set of notes that painfully reflected my teaching of freshman composition students. BORING...and, worse, unnecessary. Our generation was taught the basics well. Fortunately, as the assembled students talked about their past classes and the reasons they wanted to continue taking a writing course, I was able to do some hasty revising of my "lesson plan," beginning the first of many new learning experiences as a teacher. Now, I feel more secure in the structure of my teaching of "Writing Your Life's Story," and I'm still learning as much as or more than any of the delightful people I work with. Not only that, I've expanded that initial class into four and, for a time, five classes. I can't list all the pleasures I get from these classes, but one of the great surprises and sources of enjoyment is that no longer do I have to read and grade endless compositions by often-reluctant students. I can *listen*, week after week, to constantly differing stories by intelligent, innovative writers.

All of the fun and pleasure; none of the drudgery.