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Excavating Beliefs and the Education of a Teacher: A Personal Story

by

Stephen I. Brown

Introduction

I have a story to tell about the power of personal knowledge and its influence on the act of teaching. While the story does not vitiate the need for imposed knowledge about subject matter or about pedagogy as components of the education of teachers, it does strengthen the conviction that what teachers already believe about such matters as teaching and definition of self in the most human terms may influence their behavior in remarkable ways.

Furthermore, it exhibits something powerful about the nature of belief: that they are not necessarily “held” explicitly nor are they “subcutaneously” waiting to be “tapped”; rather, they may erupt unexpectedly when they are simultaneously under siege from some forces but protected by others. The story suggests the power of therapy-like activities in enabling teachers to become aware of the existence and full import of deeply submerged and sometimes painful beliefs.

Some Personal Background

I have been engaged for several years in conceptualizing and conducting ethnographic style research on the ways in which teachers make meaning of their experiences and on the unimposed beliefs they hold. In that context I have participated in the creation of strategies designed to elicit their beliefs, to uncover the origins of such beliefs, and to evaluate their intensity. I have also studied the relationship between such beliefs and teaching practice. None of that research, however, speaks as strongly for the value of uncovering the substance and structure of teachers’ beliefs and for the power of their elicitation through non-contrived means as the following story.

This story is neither “objective,” nor buffered with a litany of qualification and reference—though it does imply criticism of our striving for the former and has implications for revisiting the scholarship of the latter (meaning-making) as well. My relationship to the central figure in this story may overstate the case slightly, but I believe that the argument is essentially sound despite (because of?) personal knowledge of the “subject.”

The story is about my son, Jordan. He is now a young adult and employed as a member of the staff of a national children’s educational television program. Six months prior to taking that position he was hired as a teacher of mathematics and science in a small private school in New York City, a job that created enormous anxiety for him and is the occasion for this story.

Though prior to taking the teaching job he had received a masters degree in education, he was not technically prepared to assume a teaching role, for the focus of his graduate program was on education in non-school settings. Furthermore, he was at a double disadvantage as a mathematics and science teacher since he had majored in neither of these subjects as an undergraduate. But we are getting ahead of the story.

Early Years

As parents, concerned citizens and educators, my wife and I were aware of the potential harm of excessive TV watching. Jordan, in fact, watched television excessively as a young child. One reason that we were disinclined to limit his TV watching, however, was that the experiences defined a universe for him that was far from passive. When he was five years old, for example, he had

watched *The Price Is Right* for a couple of weeks. One Saturday morning, he woke up his three year old sister, my wife, and me and invited us to the living room to participate in his version of the TV program. He had gotten up a few hours earlier and had reconstructed a cardboard box to be used as a podium for himself as host. He selected many objects from our household and assigned prices to them. Our job as contestants was to guess their values. He had created prizes for the contestants out of origami in his room and had simulated dollar bills to accompany the prizes. It was a tad capitalistic perhaps, but not violent—at least in the conventional sense in which violence is displayed and internalized by excessive TV watching.

After watching a number of TV superhero series, when he was seven years old, he learned to sew so that he could make his own costume of *Superman* out of scraps of material, placed himself on a bridge table next to a hidden electric fan capable of blowing his cape, and asked me to take home movies of the scene so that he would appear to be flying. After having developed the film, he showed it to us with his own version of a superman story. A few weeks later he asked me to figure out a way of superimposing his *Superman* scene on movies we had taken of the Wailing Wall during our stay in Jerusalem the previous year.

When Jordan was nine years old, we had just moved for the fourth time in four years. He had begun to establish close friendships with several of his classmates—something he had not achieved in other recent moves and something he had cherished. He had begun studying the piano with a teacher he admired, and he felt comfortable at school and in the community in which we lived. His adjustment meant a great deal to us because we had just returned from our year in Jerusalem where he had encountered more frustration than we had realized during our stay there—a matter we shall return to shortly.

Unlike his accommodation to the new environment, I was having a difficult time in my new teaching job. I was unhappy with what appeared to me to be a wrong-headed emphasis on power and prestige. (In appreciation for what was perceived as good teaching, I was to be rewarded the following year with an office that was, according to my chairperson, “two feet larger than my seniority.”)

After two months, I received a call from a colleague at another university who urged me to apply for an opening in his department. Enticing as it appeared, I was reluctant to even consider the position since we as a family had been uprooted so often in so short a period of time. It was Jordan who, unsolicited, urged me to go for an interview on the grounds that it would be easier for him to make new friends than for me to modify what I perceived to be an unhappy work environment.

We made the move and Jordan further developed earlier skills he had acquired as a magician. He was intrigued as much by the patter and the entertainment value of magic as by the *legerdemain*—all of which he mastered well enough to perform professionally at social functions.

Throughout his teens, Jordan continued to exemplify traits that are associated with creativity and interpersonal and intrapersonal competence and compassion. Though he was able to master college preparatory science and mathematics courses, he continued to be enticed by the less technical and more imaginative aspects of these fields. He was never intrigued by the linear order and logical details of these subjects. He did, however, read all kinds of recreational books on mathematics and science. Among his favorites were books by Martin Gardner dealing with magic squares, pentominoes, hexaflexagons, and geometric oddities. He loved the geometric and spatial playfulness of such topics as hexaflexagons and he created gifts of photographic albums that exhibited the mystifying properties associated with them.

When Jordan was a junior in high school, we all spent a year in Georgia. There, his creative efforts in the humanities continued to blossom. In his American history course, he chose as his term project to locate songs that depicted essential features of the American Civil War and he both analyzed and performed them for his classmates. His earlier interest in magic evolved into a full blown dedication to acting, and he performed in several plays with a local community theater group.

Post Teens

Jordan attended a small college in the midwest that was known for its social consciousness, its focus on teaching, and its rigorous curriculum. After completing his sophomore year, he took a year off to acquire some work experience and to decide what he wanted to major in for his last two years of college. After speaking and writing to people who had succeeded in fields that interested him and after considerable deliberation, he decided that what intrigued him most was the study of humor. The school had an independent major program and Jordan submitted a twenty-five page proposal that argued for the study of humor as a special major. It was approved with some trepidation by a committee of professors whose paramount concern was that intellectual respectability might be compromised with a subject as “frivolous” as humor.

During the last two years of his college program, he took standard courses in philosophy, English, psychology, and history, but in every case wrote a term paper that examined some of the fundamental issues of the course from the perspective of humor. In some cases, he wrote to prominent people in the field in order to acquire information and evidence for a particular point of view. In his psychology course, for example, he wrote to B. F. Skinner—after finding out that he had been known as a prankster in his undergraduate years at Hamilton College—in order to request that he elaborate on the role humor played in his life. He also requested further information on the application of reinforcement theory to humor. Skinner, in his late seventies at the time, wrote back to Jordan telling him that, though humor played an important part in his life, he did not have the time to answer his questions. Jordan replied, “Thank you very much for your response. It was a good first approximation of an answer. Enclosed is a candy bar for your answer. For further reinforcement, please send more information.” Unfortunately, he received no further correspondence from Skinner, and therefore decided to write a paper in which he had an imaginary dialogue between Freud and Skinner on psychological theories of humor.

In his senior year at college, Jordan was invited to teach two courses—one on issues of gender (based on training he had received the previous year) and another on humor. Jordan not only had learned a great deal about the field of humor from a scholarly point of view, but had begun to refine his own sense of humor—a sense of humor that was always more contextual than joke telling, one that was philosophical in that it gently exposed human frailty. He began performing at a comedy club—comedy that included original songs, many of which were take-offs on famous tunes. One of his early songs was sung to the tune of “Camelot” and was about the pressure of college life. It was entitled “Cram-A-Lot.” He developed a repertoire of such songs and patter and won a number of local comedy club competitions.

One upshot of his ability both to perform and to analyze humor was an invitation to be the keynote speaker for the Chautauqua Institute’s *Humor in America Week* a year after he graduated from college. Chautauqua Institute is an educational/recreational/spiritually oriented retreat in New York State. Nine U.S. presidents had been selected as keynote speakers in its hundred or so year history. Jordan lectured and performed to an audience of over five thousand members. It was alleged by the organizing committee that he was the youngest person ever to be invited to lecture at the Institute. His talk combined the analysis of the creation and functions of humor with original songs that exemplified his main points. One song, sung to the famous Gilbert and Sullivan tune, was entitled “I Am The Very Model of A College Major Humorist.” In another, he summarized the history of philosophy of humor from Plato and Aristotle through Freud and Kestrel.

Job (Double Entendre) Time

Jordan had hoped to pursue a career that enabled him to generalize from the Chautauqua experience. Though he had been invited to give additional talks, the number was inadequate however to sustain him professionally. For a period of two years he supplemented his lectureship

with “Groucho-grams”—regaled in the costume of Groucho Marx and accompanied by tailor-made songs in the Groucho spirit for special occasions of his clients. Though moderately successful, he decided that the experience and credentials of additional education were needed to further his goal. He therefore decided to enroll in a Masters degree program that focused on teaching in non-school settings. After completing the program he was not able to find or create what he perceived to be a viable position in the field of lecturing/entertainment. He considered himself quite lucky to land a job teaching mathematics and science to fourth through eighth grade students at a small private school in New York City.

Given his earlier success in teaching courses to his colleagues, his love of playful aspects of math and science, his ability to captivate audiences with extemporaneous humor, his interest in popular culture, his enormous energy, and his ability to listen carefully, we predicted that he had chosen wisely. Now for the rest of story.

Three Months of Torture

About two weeks after Jordan began teaching, he started asking for help. He spoke to several teachers in his school who were sympathetic enough to listen to the problems that are associated with first year teaching. He spoke to friends who had experienced some similar difficulties. He spoke to his mother and to me as well.

Jordan never considered it to be a sign of weakness to share personal problems, and he has always been overly generous in offering similar assistance to acquaintances, close personal friends, and to members of his family.

The first year of teaching has its problems—even for those who have received formal preparation—and much has been documented about the overly egocentric nature and accompanying early stages of one of the most complex of professions. Given his lack of training in matters of curriculum *per se*, but given what I perceived to be inordinate compensating strength, I anticipated that he would be able to face and overcome a number of frustrations associated with the job.

That is not what happened, however. Though he sought help and appeared to listen to curriculum advice from colleagues in his school and from friends, he put up less of a façade with his most intimate friends and his parents. What did he want to talk to us about?—primarily how to organize his classes. But what was so intriguing was that he did not want to relate that organization to matters of curriculum. Furthermore, it was the minutia of organization that captured his attention. We listened to him figure out details of one grand scheme after another. Should he count his students’ daily homework for one credit or two? Should he give quizzes once a week or twice? Should it be three or four quizzes that would be equivalent in points to one large test?

What was most distressing is that after he had come to some satisfactory scheme, he would tell us that he was seriously thinking of dramatically changing it the following week. He would consider telling all his students that instead of numbers he would assign letter grades on each quiz, and instead of grading homework he would just acknowledge whether or not they had submitted it at all. It is not that he did not plan what to teach (for he was frequently up until 2 or 3 a.m. doing so) but rather that he wanted no input on such matters and, though he solicited our opinion about classroom organization, he rarely discussed curriculum with us.

We listened carefully and tried to persuade him to select almost *any* scheme on the grounds that having something relatively coherent and consistent was more important than arriving at some ideal format—especially if it was to be replaced by another incompatible one the following week. In addition to throwing issues of consistency to the wind, he did not appear to base his modifications on relevant classroom evidence. It surprised us because Jordan has always had his fingers on the pulse of those with whom he has interacted.

Most importantly, from our point of view, was that he was terribly unhappy. Though we were not short on advice with regard to such matters and though we did voice our opinion regarding the

issue of consistency, we continued to encourage him to ask himself what was behind each new scheme, to consider why he was intent on frequent modification and, most importantly, try to figure out why he was so unhappy.

Our phone conversations became more frequent. By the third month, we began to fear for his mental and physical health. It was clear that he was exhausted most of the time, and we began to feel that he was spinning his wheels and that we were offering little help. We began to think that it would be wise for him to quit, but we feared that without resolving some of what was behind it all he would be left with scars that might be transplanted to new wounds.

In order to appreciate the dénouement, it is necessary to fill in the story a bit about a portion of Jordan's life that I alluded to earlier—our year in Jerusalem.

A Flashback

We had arrived in Jerusalem the July following Jordan's sixth birthday. I had intended to be there on a sabbatical leave for one year, and had so informed Jordan and his sister Sharon, who was four years old at the time. Within two months of our arrival, Sharon had begun to speak Hebrew fluently. Jordan had begun to understand Hebrew, but he would not speak it. He attended second grade in the local public school, and did his written homework in Hebrew by the time we were there for three months, but he would not speak Hebrew—not to his classmates, not his teacher, not to us.

Though we understood much less of the language than he did, my wife Eileen and I began to speak Hebrew at home, with the hope that he would follow suit. He did not do so, however.

In March of that year, the four of us drove to Tel Aviv to pick up the boat tickets for our return home the following July. *In the car, on the way home, Jordan began speaking Hebrew.* The following week he began speaking Hebrew in school and even volunteered to shop alone at local stores at which he was required to speak the language.

Eileen and I spent a long time trying to understand the dynamics of this situation. We spoke to Jordan about it—wanting to know why he so resisted speaking Hebrew until March, despite the fact that he understood the language, and why he was so positively inclined afterwards. After several months of gentle prodding, Jordan finally let us in on the dynamics of it all. "Let us in on" is perhaps a deceptive turn of phrase, for Jordan appeared not to be fully aware himself of some deeply entrenched beliefs he was holding prior to our efforts to discuss these matters. What finally emerged, however, was a story which intrigued all of us a great deal. Jordan apparently was much less happy in Jerusalem than we had realized. He desperately missed his friends from home and he had fears connected with news commentary he barely understood about a hostile political climate. A six year old cannot easily incorporate nor totally dismiss the power of an injunction to not pick up interesting looking items from the ground since they might be disguised grenades.

Most importantly, Jordan had convinced himself that if he adjusted well to the new country we would decide to stay permanently. He drew this conclusion despite the fact that we had told him on numerous occasions that we had come to visit for only one year. Furthermore, he had convinced himself that we would take his ability to speak Hebrew as a sign of his acclimation. Once we had tickets for the return trip in hand, he knew that it would be safe to speak. He had incontrovertible evidence that we would not stay no matter how well he had adjusted!

The Dénouement: Third Week in November

Back to Jordan twenty years later ... The third week in November of his first semester of teaching he called us at home with much excitement in his voice. "I had an insight about my reaction to teaching and about my search for the perfect organizational scheme." After much deliberation and significant anxiety connected with the search, he had come to the following conclusion: "*I think*

I have been treating the teaching of math and science in the same way I treated learning Hebrew in Jerusalem.”

Eileen and I figured out what he meant. It had been Jordan’s desire for a long time to operate in some way as a humorologist—as an analyst of the field of humor and as entertainer/performer at some level. By directing his efforts to classroom matters that he perceived to be relatively inconsequential, he had found what he thought was an unobtrusive way to subvert his competence as a teacher. He realized that if he were to direct his efforts in more positive directions (learning Hebrew?), then he *might* become a first rate teacher and would be bound to teaching (living in Israel?) for the rest of his life.

The power of that realization was overwhelming. Jordan stopped calling us on a daily basis. When we spoke to him a week later we asked what he was doing in his teaching, and he told us that for his math classes he was doing mathematical card tricks and in his science classes he was creating sealed “black boxes” and instructed the students to hypothesize something about their contents with the aid of some tools he had supplied (magnets, scales, electric currents).

When we asked him how he was planning to grade students on these tasks, he told us that he did not know but that both he and his classes were experiencing the vibrant atmosphere he sought from the beginning. When we asked him what he would do the following week, he told us that he intended to take his classes to the nearby science museum and had organized classes so that students could make suggestions about how they would improve the exhibits.

Conclusion

In his last several weeks of teaching, Jordan had become a teacher in ways that he recognized as respectable. What it took for that to happen was not significant input from anyone in terms of classroom management, organization, or curriculum. While he now was in a position to discuss these matters, he was able to do so in such a way that he could make full use of his intelligence and creativity.

It is interesting that, though educators have come to respect the child’s world—beliefs, fears, attitudes, theories about science and what have you—as something that is “constructed” rather than “received,” they have only recently come to appreciate the analogy for teachers. Jordan had some powerful theory of a personal nature—linking his competence to the “sentence” of becoming a teacher permanently. What was needed for him to become an exemplary teacher was not so much more input, but rather an invitation for him to discover and listen carefully to what he believed about the nature of teaching and the direction his life might take.

Jordan’s story is unique in many ways. His specific competencies and his particular fears may not abound in the population at large. Nevertheless, all of us come to teaching with values, beliefs, attitudes, myths, theories that have the potential to enhance and destroy us. Furthermore, many of these attitudes and beliefs are so deeply buried that we are unaware that we are harboring them. If we as teacher educators are concerned with excellence in teaching, it is particularly appropriate that we search for ways of enabling future teachers to listen to themselves and to discover that empowerment is created and unleashed as much by finding out who they are (as teachers, friends, students) as by being told about their professional lives and obligations by well-meaning but intrusive professional voices.

We all listen to each other differently under different circumstances. It would seem to be a high research priority for teacher educators to inquire into strategies and styles of listening to teachers. In our technological era which thrives on efficiency and instantaneous satisfaction, we need to find ways of honoring heuristics that may achieve results slowly, that place increased credence upon dialogue with teachers, that sensitize us all to the significance of what may look like merely passing comments, that encompass considerably more in the way of personhood than

matters of curriculum and instruction alone, that run the risk of leading nowhere and that have the potential to illuminate our greatest joys and fears as well.

We might profit considerably from attending more carefully in the education of teachers to the metaphors of therapy in order to enable us not only to unearth beliefs and meanings that our “clients” hold, but to help them uncover what is behind those beliefs.

Jordan did not know at the beginning of his quest for help where his journey would lead. He had the courage, however, to pursue the call with tenacity over a protracted period of time. A combination of good sense regarding the kind of help he needed, together with a healthy (though pained) self-esteem, disinclined him from taking premature advice on our part as a solution to his problem. He knew intuitively that pain is frequently generated by what is most hidden from each of us, and that its underpinnings are sometimes revealed in collaboration with patient but loving mirrors who care enormously about the outcome.