



Why Teach?: In Defense of a Real Education

Edmundson, Mark
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Book Review

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The “final vocabulary” is the network of meanings that our students bring into the classroom – that are true to them, and our job is to open that vocabulary to change. “All good teaching entails some kidnapping,” Edmundson writes; “there is a touch of malice involved . . . As well as some sorrow.” Mark Edmundson makes this remark in thinking about the teacher who introduced him to the intellectual life, Doug Meyers. Meyers sounds like most of us who love to teach: “strange, uncool,” “offbeat,” willing to be a little silly to make a point, and “counterintuitive” (181), as well as passionate about what we love, and, yes, a bit self-centered. Yet, Meyers’s gift as a teacher was to enter a high school classroom – in the same way that Wittgenstein entered elementary school classrooms – and, in his philosophy class, to probe, to adjust, to meet the students where they were, and to provoke.

In *Why Teach?* Edmundson is well aware of what professors face in the “corporate city.” My university has never hosted monster trucks, as the University of Virginia did, but, like all colleges and universities, in its quest for the best students, highest awards, and so on, it is consumer driven. Sounding like Augustine of Hippo, Edmundson urges all of us – for this book is as much about being a student as being a teacher or being a student/teacher – to move within the corporate city to find the scholarly enclave, where one will be challenged. He asks us to stop thinking of teaching as “training and entertaining” (188). Edmundson is aware that teaching and learning is not the heart for most in the corporate city, but he urges us to make it so. Part of this is slowing students (and professors) down, turning students from their hyper fast-paced, technology-centered lives, powered by coffee, energy drinks, and endless choice – their desires always to be elsewhere (36) – towards something deeper. For Edmundson, whose father, a working-class man who had not had a college education and who urged Edmundson to

follow his passions, education is to resist being the “intersections of many evaluative and potentially determining discourses” (59) and to seek to imagine and to interrogate whom we might *become* (63).

This process – and Edmundson stresses process, with its necessary failures – is powered by finding our key interlocutors. For Edmundson, Freud (whose interlocutor is the Greek tragedians but, mostly, Shakespeare), Emerson, Plato, and others provide this role: “The best reason to read them is to see if they know you better than you know yourself. You may find your own suppressed and rejected thoughts following back to you with an ‘alienated majesty’” (61). As teachers, we should urge students – and ourselves – to face the challenges of those who do not agree with us and reason our ways through their power. We will find life thickened in this “soul making” (xiii) activity.

Two things about this book are important for all teachers to know. First, our students are not dumb; they are overwhelmed by the desire for success: theirs, their parents’, and society’s emphasis on material wealth. Second, they are 9/11 babies, who live by *carpe diem*: avoiding closure, wanting endless choice (in terms of education: long drop-add periods, pass-fail options, and the ability to drop a class as late as possible with the “innocuous W” but also double and triple majors, with a minor or two thrown in), and always wanting to know everything and to be elsewhere. And, faced with this daunting configuration, they, ironically, avoid challenge.

Edmundson begins his book with every professor’s worst day: the teaching evaluation day. He thinks about how these little exercises in “consumer expertise” (4), and good evaluations, unfortunately, often reflect how well we met the criteria of enjoyment (entertainment) and interest (consumption). This makes educational institutions like “northern outposts of Club Med” (26). To feed, therefore, the illusion of busyness and excellence, we may issue no challenges – in short, we may pander. To really try to educate this generation (and, I would add, to avoid the censure of their parents), to urge them to read, to which I will return, “to be influenced, to learn something new, to be thrown off . . . course and onto another, better way” (63) is risky.

Edmundson demonstrates how he was thrown off and challenged by Meyers and by his experience of his own interlocutors. Homer, whom he uses to think about football and Lawrence Taylor, Plato, Emerson, William James, Malcolm X (whose book stressed Malcolm’s love for learning, oddly, was *the* book for a white, Irish Catholic working-class kid from Boston), William Blake, who had to deal with the corporate city in his own way because of his patron, and football, Ludacris, and Biggie Smalls all led Edmundson to and let him interrogate

the life he lives. His endless curiosity reminds me of something Historian of Religions Charles H. Long once told me, that the intellectual is interested in *everything*.

Edmundson urges us away from excellence, from always measuring and being in hierarchy, which our success-driven students have experienced in elementary and high school, to eloquence. If every subject, every major, is a language, and a student is adopting one, or more, of these languages as her own, she will “want to know how to speak it expertly” but also know its limitations: “how it fails to deal with those concerns for which it has no adequate words.” He continues, “You’ll be looking into the reach of every metaphor that every discipline offers, and you’ll be trying to see around their corners” (65).

Edmundson shows us that teaching and learning and research and living are not separate. He makes a powerful case for a holistic and very human vision of the liberal arts:

The quest at the center of a liberal arts education is not a luxury quest; it’s a necessity quest. If you do not undertake it, you risk leading a life of desperation – maybe quiet; maybe in time, very loud – and I am not exaggerating. For you risk trying to be someone other than who you are, which in the long run is killing. (59)

What do the arguments of a professor of literature and theory have to do with those of us who teach religion? Edmundson cites Matthew Arnold’s recognition that underscores my area of Arts, Literature, and Religion: that if religion wanes, literature will be the site that holds meaning. But Edmundson knows that religion has not waned. He recognizes – comparing and contrasting the task of the University of Virginia, to develop the head, with the task of Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University, to develop the heart – that students do not divorce those. They are deeply concerned with the meaning of their lives; therefore, we cannot leave the heart (198) to Jerry Falwell. Students may put their experiences in a facile, non-interrogated way as “spirituality,” but, more often, they have deep commitments for which someone else has articulated the meaning. Edmundson recognizes that it is in religion that we most often encounter students’ “final vocabularies.” Edmundson reminds us that students bring these narratives into the classroom. They are “where our principles lie”; they are “the core” of being, and “the point beyond which mere analysis cannot go” (192).

So, how do we go beyond them? We start with the head: reason and critical thinking. What religious studies and literature have in common, he suggests, is the love of books, of words. Both “attempt to teach one essential power, and they often do so with marked success”: reading (194). Through teaching students to read with care, we bring those “final vocabularies,” which really are only “for now” (193), into contact with other “final vocabularies,” not as a test or to create new hierarchies, but to generate critical reflection – to

ignite what I call the moral imagination. Our aim in teaching students to read is not conversion. It is to move students to encounter with the “other”: to “encounter between the transcendental and the worldly” (198). Edmundson writes, “The objective is to help the students place their ultimate narratives in the foreground and render them susceptible to influence” (198). To get students to interrogate those held truths, Edmundson asks us to move beyond mere interpretation to meaning, asking the Platonic question: “Is it true?” (195). He is not asking us to deal in ultimate truths – the sense that we hold those is what encounter unsettles – but to teach so that our students interrogate the “live options” of a text – or for us, of another’s religious way of life (195). This sort of teaching does not replace religion, but teaches one to recognize that “a most pressing spiritual and intellectual task of the moment is to create a dialogue between religious and secular approaches to life” (197). Students may leave “with their religious convictions deepened,” but they are more “thoughtful believers than when they began” (197-198). We begin, therefore, in “secular dialogue” and move to what Edmundson calls “impersonation” or advocacy (201-202) for the text, in which we, the teachers, “offer an inspiring version of what is most vital in the author,” tempting our students into making the “past available to the uses of the present” (202). This lets us deal with the heart and spirit, not doing our students the “injustice” of leaving that to the Jerry Falwells of the world.

I must say here that Edmundson does not dismiss what is new. He does not dismiss theory; he just asks readers to be wary of supplying “a standing set of terms to every text” (203). Theory, he suggests, reminds us of the power of books to persuade; that is why it is so careful of them. And he does not dismiss diversity and multiculturalism. He worries that we breaks boundaries too fast, “asking students to know others before they know themselves” (208) and supplying our students with just enough knowledge to be exploitative of the “other” in the global marketplace (208).

Edmundson insists that the intellectual quest offers to our students the joy and passion we felt when we started out as students. This passion, he argues, is about the freedom of self-making in democracy, in articulating the self amid and in relation to the multiplicity of ways of being that we experience in the world. Using a metaphor familiar to those of us who teach religion, Edmundson speaks of maps. He argues that books can map or transform lives and that our students are in need of maps that both locate and challenge “their existing sense of the territory” (205), and that, with our carefully adversarial and joyful guidance, lead them into “self-aware self-revision” (207).

I very much admire the courage and spirit of this book. Edmundson does not throw anything away: he, himself, is learning digital techniques for his classroom even as he insists on the

“old-timey” practice of close reading. I hope that I have not made this book sound like a curmudgeonly defense of the “old days.” It is not. It is a beautifully written and often funny but careful reflection on what we gain by holding fast to and what we lose by abandoning the basics of a liberal arts education: reading, writing, fluency, and ongoing engagement in self- and world-reflection.

There is an ongoing bass note that sounds through the book: Can you live it? That reminded me of a student in one of my religion and literature classes who told the class one day that he was trying to live out the ethos of each author as we read: “That D. H. Lawrence week,” he moaned, “was hell.” We all laughed, but learned something: that the transgressive, always-in-tension D. H. Lawrence, did not articulate as whole a vision of the good life as he thought he did. That student conquered what Edmundson calls “knowingness”: the sense that we know everything – or can find it on the web – and that we are in charge (181). He shows us a powerful way, one that continually reminds us of our useable past, to crack that tendency in ourselves and in our students. He speaks with the integrity of one willing to risk his own ultimate map all the time. This is a man, after all, who found one key interlocutor and intellectual companion in Malcolm X.

Patricia O’Connell Killen always asks professors in workshops and colloquies two questions: “What is your passion?” and “When did you know you had asked a good question?” Killen’s second question points to what Edmundson is asking of us: not to dwell in certainty but to surrender to the joy of doubt and curiosity and to read, read, read. That path, perhaps, will lead us (back) to the answer for Killen’s second question, to our passions.

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