

THINGS I'VE LEARNED IN TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF TEACHING IN THE CONSERVATORY

I'm holding what for me is an almost sacred relic. It's an old business card on which I wrote the phone number of my friend Tom's brother-in-law, after Tom suggested I call him about a possible one-year job opening at Wheaton. I called Tony Payne, and seven days later got the job, but someone forgot to tell me when that year was over. 25 years later, I'm grateful to God for making me a part of this community, and giving me so many blessings through it, not the least of whom is my wife, Denise.

When Dr. Litfin asked me to speak about teaching at Wheaton, I began a top-ten list of things I've learned in all those years. I didn't succeed; the list grew too long and could easily be longer. In any case, here it is:

1. **Since I am to love the Lord our God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind and all my strength, I ought to be teaching the heart, the soul, the intellect and the body.**

In academia, we sometimes proceed as if Jesus had said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind, all your mind, all your mind, and with all your mind." But God has created us whole, and we are to bring everything that we are to the altar. I rejoice that music joins body and spirit, heart and head, abstract and concrete so beautifully, and that to study it is to discover things about one's humanity in a way that perhaps only theater can match.

2. **The purpose of teaching is not to prove to a student how much I know about a subject. Giving a student less than everything I know may actually teach the student more.**

Oh, did I ever show off as a rookie teacher, partly out of pride, and partly out of fear that leaving out one little bit of what I knew might reveal me to be a fraud. But teaching is far more than bombarding the student with information, or dazzling them with my intellect or musicianship. So much depends on the little thing, shared in such a way that it is grasped deeply, and not just for the final exam. This leads to a corollary:

3. **"I don't know" can be the most profound and authentic thing to say in a teaching situation.**

Saying it allows me to be genuinely human in my teaching, and reminds me of where I really am. It's certainly very useful to know how to find out what I don't know, these days, I must always remember that the answer isn't always found in a Google search.

- 4. I never can tell exactly what my students will remember; in fact, it won't always be what I think is most important.**

Final exam essay questions are a good way of finding out what my students actually heard me say. Sometimes they get it spectacularly wrong, but more often than not they get what's important even when I don't, or at least what they remember will help them, sometimes in ways I can hardly imagine.

- 5. Never underestimate the potential of a student; if a student hasn't surprised me in four years, he or she is very likely to surprise me later.**

The older I get, and the more former students friend me on Facebook, the more I see that Wheaton students have a remarkable way of confounding my expectations, especially my LOW ones. The C-student who is now a doctoral student in piano while playing in a successful rock band; the unfocused BA student who is now nationally known for her work as a piano teacher of children with Down Syndrome -- these students and more tell me never to underestimate anyone who walks through the door of my studio.

- 6. Success and failure are both inevitable in teaching, as in the rest of life. I will fail, and since I am not only teaching students how to succeed but also how to handle failure, I might as well not hide it when I do.**

I have failed, and will continue to do so. Some students have left me for other teachers, despite or because of my imagined brilliance. I have off-nights and even full-fledged batting slumps on stage, but if I dare, I can teach by example that my worth is NOT dependant on always being flawless, or even good at what I do. Our students are crying out, inwardly if not outwardly to learn this, and if we don't teach them this, who will?

- 7. The moment I stop learning, I will stop teaching effectively.**

Plain enough, but I'll add another corollary: **The roles of student and teacher may sometimes get reversed, and that's not a bad thing.**

- 8. My studio or classroom is not the only place where students are learning.**

It's easy to become possessive or territorial about the students we teach, especially in the arts, where every artist is sure that he uniquely possesses the truth. We have to accept, and even celebrate the fact that students will sometimes hear best what I am trying to say when someone else says it. It may be one of my colleagues, it may be a pastor, chapel speaker, a counselor, or even, Heaven forbid, another student in a dorm-room bull session. I don't have it all; to paraphrase the title of Hillary Clinton's book, it takes the whole of Wheaton College to train whole and effective Christians. Thank God, the whole task isn't on my shoulders alone! This leads directly into:

- 9. Teaching is not a solo sport; it's done in community. In an educational institution, and supremely in a Christian one, the quality of community will strongly influence the quality of learning in that institution.**

One of the greatest compliments I've ever received came from a mother who told me that while others had taught her daughter music, I had taught her life. We talk much about the integration of faith and learning here at Wheaton, but the integration of both with living is crucial if our teaching is to be other than the clanging of cymbals. When we fall short of loving our brothers and sisters in this institution, even when it's hard, students notice, and are tempted to cynicism or worse.

- 10. Teaching and scholarship aren't enemies.**

My scholarship teaches, and my teaching stretches, expands and informs my scholarship. Both take lots of time, and the struggle for balance is often very difficult for me, as it is for many of my colleagues. Yet, through teaching for 25 years, and forcing myself quite literally to practice what I teach, I've become a better musician. Similarly, my teaching is never so fresh and vital as it is when I'm in the midst or at the conclusion of one of my own creative projects.

- 11. My impact on students and my legacy to Wheaton or to my discipline will be inversely proportional to the amount of striving I do to make an impact or leave a legacy.**

The more self-conscious I am, the less conscious I am of my students, my colleagues, and my daily tasks, and the more I forget that it's not about me anyway.

- 12. My work, like my life, is largely hidden in Christ; much of the meaning and extent of what I have done will only be revealed when Christ is revealed in glory.**

To me, this is it in a nutshell, said better by Saint Paul than I ever could. I cannot and will not ever in this life fully comprehend what God has been doing in and through my life. If I clearly knew it, I wouldn't be able to bear the weight or the splendor of it. What I, and all of us will ultimately know will be revealed when Christ is revealed, and when He is revealed, all of what we ever were or did will be dim in comparison to His Light.