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A Teacher Finds (the) Heart of Teaching

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Several years ago a student came to my office for some help with statistics. It was a bad day, and I found myself becoming annoyed at her apparent ignorance of elementary arithmetic operations, procedures I felt she should have learned in high school. Finally, I was no longer able to contain my irritation, and I blurted out the accusation that she should already know the material. At that moment, she looked at me and in a tone of pure objectivity, said, “Dr. Lawry, I really don’t think your remark is very helpful.

My eyes met hers and for a moment I was speechless. Her candor and maturity, not to mention courage, pierced my heart. After a long breath, I was able to apologize and we went on with a successful tutorial. When the student departed, I realized that the experience had taught me a valuable lesson, one I would like to share.

The longer I teach the more I come to the realization that what we call “teaching” is but creating an environment in which the student learns, or perhaps more accurately, teaches himself. This environment has many components but the most important one, I am convinced, is love. It was the writer Goethe who said that the teachers who had the greatest influence on him were not the most brilliant but those who loved him. After almost 20 years of college teaching I am beginning to understand what Goethe means.

Those who saw the recent film, “Educating Rita,” witnessed what a powerful motivator love can be for a young woman who is no longer satisfied with being a relatively uneducated hairdresser. What is fortunate for Rita is that she finds a teacher who learns to care about her and her education in spite of the fact that he is an alcoholic and all but burned out. The fact that the professor, played by Michael Caine, happens to fall in love with Rita (Julie Walters) is might vbe termed an occupational hazard that happens frequently enough but just as frequently is gotten over, as the movie’s last scene promises.

There are few authorities in my field of educational psychology who are writing about the place of love in the classroom with the exception of Carl Rogers and Leo Buscaglia. In a little known study published 10 years ago, two researchers (Asby and Roebuck of the National Consortium for Humanizing Education, 1974) found that what Carl Rogers calls empathy, congruence, and positive regard, as

measurable characteristics of grade-school teachers, contribute significantly to classroom learning.

In other words, teachers who measure high in empathy, congruence, and positive regard produce students who score higher on standardized achievement tests than teachers who measure low. Not only that but those teachers with high empathy, etc. had better student attendance rates and fewer students with school phobia. Unfortunately, this is an isolated study on a topic that needs further research and understanding.

For Christmas, my sister gave me a copy of Buscaglia's new book, "Living, Loving, and Learning." In it, Buscaglia laments the fact that all too frequently parents neglect to tell their children that they love them. I recently asked my 16 year-old daughter whether she could remember the last time I told her that I loved her.

She thought for a moment and said. "Gee, Dad, it must be a long time ago because I can't remember." Needless to say, I told her I loved her as I dropped her off at school where she is boarding. I felt especially close to her as we hugged goodbye.

I haven't yet learned how to tell my students that I love them but on my office door that hangs the title page of a book by Swami Muknanada that reads: "I Welcome You All With Love." I wish I had the courage to say that on the first day of class.