THREE TEACHERS

Hopefully, you had a few teachers in your life that inspired you. Maybe some even steered you into choosing a particular life path. Having been a teacher myself for thirty years, I'd like to think that I also had a formative and positive influence on my many students.

I attended a co-ed Catholic elementary school called St. Bride's, which was located on Chicago's south side. In fifth grade, at age ten, I had a wonderful nun-teacher named Sister Kenneth. (Later, she was promoted, and earned the title of Mother Kenneth.) She was a small in size -- in her black and white religious uniform -- with wire-rimmed spectacles and a 'V' shaped upper lip, which slightly resembled a soft bird's beak. Sister Kenneth was a formidable combination of smart and tough, however. She could be strict when called upon to be , but was similarly well-regarded for her fairness.

She showed a special interest in me one day when she discovered my fascination with maps and globes. Sister Kenneth soon fed me a steady intellectual diet of National Geographic magazines, which I had previously been unaware even existed. We would briefly talk after class about the far-away lands of the world -- their different cultures, architecture, foods, religions, and dramatic histories. It was all so exotic and mysteriously alluring! Sister Kenneth then told me that my fervent curiosity made me destined to travel the globe someday.

"I'm afraid I will never be able to do that myself, because I am under my strict religious orders of poverty and obedience. But you can travel freely when you grow up, Jack, and I believe you will...Just please remember me when you see such wonders for yourself. My spirit will always be there, right beside you, when you do." And then she briefly hugged me.

When I did indeed begin traveling the world, I made it a point to send Mother Kenneth postcards from several amazing foreign lands. (So far, I have been to 114 countries and all 50 states.) When I found out that she had retired from teaching and was later in an archdiocese nursing home for nuns (and was now in her 80s), I wrote her a long letter, thanking her again for all of her inspiration and encouragement. By this time, I had also become a teacher, so I informed her of my career choice, and how I found it quite rewarding.

Unfortunately, I found out later through a fellow elementary classmate that Mother Kenneth had gone blind and was in declining health. I had moved to California by then when I heard that news, and wanted to go visit my favorite nun the very next time I was back in Illinois. However, that same kind classmate (who still lived in Illinois) was able to see Mother Kenneth several times over the following months, and relayed my well wishes. She told me that Mother Kenneth had received all of my postcards and had kept them, and that when a nursing aide read my letter to her, that same aide reported that Sister's sightless eyes filled with tears of happiness. Shortly after hearing that touching story, I found out that Mother Kenneth had passed away. I was deeply saddened, but I will never forget her.

At St. Francis de Sales High School, on Chicago's far southeast side, my second favorite teacher was also a nun. Her name was Sister Zita. She taught world history and geography. She was fifty years old when I graduated in 1969, and she would live to the venerable age of one-hundred! She passed away just last year -- only a few months before my fifty-year high school reunion.

Sister Zita was tall and commanding -- each day demanding and challenging the intellectual rigor of her students. Like Mother Kenneth, she wore silver-rimmed spectacles. Her face was somewhat mannish and creased with gravitas, but I eagerly came to class in anticipation of her lectures and her subsequent lively discussions. Steady, good-natured, and energetic, Sister Zita never suffered fools or the indolent. She was also quick-witted, as only those with high intelligence can be. Her calm, focused manner and learned wisdom made an indelible impression on my mind, to this day.

In college at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, I met my third favorite teacher, English professor Robert T. Self. A North Carolina native, he was small-framed, in his late 20s, and wore large, black-framed eyeglasses. 'Bob' looked a bit like Russia's V.I. Lenin, with a bald crown, a neat goatee, and an impressively high forehead -- displaying physical proof, I imagined, of his remarkable intelligence. Dr. Self taught American literature, poetry, and later, film. He introduced me and my colleagues into watching our very first foreign films -- dubbed in English -- at a free, weekend student entertainment venue known as Cine Club. It was an entirely new world of movies!

Dr. Self would lecture in class by sitting on the edge of his desk in the front the room, occasionally lighting up a cigarette. Then he would get up and pace the room in nervous energy. In discussing a particular author or poet, he would exhort us, in a fevered frenzy: "What do you think? What is this great work trying to say to us today? Doesn't this story/poem move you? Doesn't this effect your emotions? How? Why?" I even recall him climbing up and standing on the top of his desk a few times, pleading for a reaction -- any reaction -- from us dumbfounded undergraduates! I always sat in the front of the class, and I would cry out: "Yes! Yes! I think I get what the author is saying here!" It was thrilling and supremely engaging.

Bob -- and his NIU professor wife, Lois -- would also regularly invite a handful of interested students (on a rotational basis) over to his house, and treat us impoverished young men and women to a home-cooked, family-style dinner, with casual but stimulating discussions of films or current events always on tap afterwards. These joyous interchanges would often stretch out until the wee hours, when everyone finally reached a state of exhaustion. This was college at its finest! Incidentally, Dr. Self taught hundreds of students for more than forty years, and was also the well-regarded author of two books on film. Happily, he and Lois are still with us. Bob is seventy-nine now, and they live in Sycamore, Illinois -- just a few miles from the NIU campus.

The three teachers I have spotlighted truly ignited my mind and touched my heart. How can such shared knowledge and learning ever be really measured and appreciated, one might ask?

I believe it is how these experiences shape our lives as we move forward, and how we, in turn, shape the lives of each new generation.

In many ways, teachers are the noble heroes of civilization -- providing the vital human connection of shared thoughts and ideas which have come down through the ages.

May God bless and continue to guide all such dedicated teachers, everywhere...

THE END

by Jack Karolewski

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