

Classroom encounters: Teaching as if it really matters

by [Ralph C. Wood](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

The encounter that most decisively shaped my teaching occurred during my very first year in the classroom. I was fresh out of graduate study at the University of Chicago Divinity School, and the lines of my life, as the psalmist says, had fallen in pleasant places. It was a lovely spring afternoon in 1972, when the North Carolina azaleas and dogwoods were in glorious blossom, and the late April breeze was wafting into my office past the maple tree outside my open window. All seemed indeed right with the world.

The knock at my door came from one of my students in an introductory class called "Theology and Modern Literature." He asked if he could bring his girlfriend in with him, and I welcomed them both.

Rather than indulging in empty chat, the student went straight to the core of his concern. He explained that they were on their way to the airport, where the girlfriend would take a plane for New York. Since *Roe v. Wade* had not yet been decided, the abortion she would soon have would also be a criminal act. My student was blunt: "We want to know what you have to say to us."

I had approached my first year of teaching believing that my chief task was to wipe the grins off fundamentalist faces. I wanted to sophisticate my students by rubbing their pious noses in the crusty snows of secularity, challenging what I assumed to be their firm but naïve faith with the hard quandaries of modern unbelief. We had read Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Our interpretive theological lens had been Paul Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern" as it is laid out in *Dynamics of Faith*. I had sought to show that while none of these novelists was a professed Christian, they all address implicitly religious questions: the persistence of doubt, the problem of suffering and tragedy, the apparent meaninglessness of human existence, even the death of God.

It's an approach still worth taking, but I was made sharply aware of its limits on this day. As my student made clear—and I soon discovered that he was altogether typical rather than exceptional—he and his girlfriend possessed so little faith that there was almost nothing to challenge, much less to overthrow. Her pregnancy had already posed to them an awful dilemma. What they needed was not sophistication, therefore, but edification and instruction of the most fundamental kind. What did I have to offer them, they wanted to know, in Christian judgment and succor?

In our class we had explored Camus's notion of human solidarity as a recourse against the world's evils. Yet this young couple was seeking something much more religiously rigorous than a deep personal identification with others. I suppose that I might have fleshed out the ethical implications of Tillich's claim that "the divine is characterized by the victory of the creative over the destructive possibility of the holy, and the demonic is characterized by the victory of the destructive over the creative possibility of the holy." But such gassy abstractions clearly would not suffice. They wanted to know, as the student put it, whether their sin could be forgiven.

I wish there were a happy end to this story—the good news that I persuaded them not to abort their baby, that the young woman took her pregnancy to full term, that the child was put up for adoption, or even that the couple married and reared it themselves. But this was and is not the truth. Instead, I fumbled and stammered and made inane claims about God's grace and mercy. Having looked to me for the bread of life, this young man and woman received little more than a stone. I had been teaching as if it didn't matter, and when the time came for it really to matter, I was found wanting in the worst way.

My failure registered upon me with a magnitude that has remained unforgettable. I saw with devastating force that I was utterly wrongheaded in my approach to teaching. My aim, as I discovered at considerable cost, is not to sophisticate my students with an experience of modern secularity, much less to bludgeon and belittle the faith that they bring to the classroom. Though most of them are Christians, they are often the products of churches that have already secularized them, albeit unawares, into our consumerist culture of comfort and convenience. Rather it is my goal to build on whatever religious foundation they may have, seeking to deepen and enlarge it.

This is not to say that I teach texts that merely console and assure. On the contrary, Faulkner and Nietzsche, the Greek tragedians and the Stoics all figure centrally in my courses, as does the darkest work in English literature—Shakespeare's *King Lear*. I also have recourse to theologians who possess a good deal more trenchancy than Tillich: Augustine and Luther, Calvin and Kierkegaard, Barth and von Balthasar. The literary artists whom I teach are equally unsentimental, often confronting more difficult challenges than the secularists: Dante and Dostoevsky, Hopkins and O'Connor, Percy and Tolkien. Rather than trumping and trampling their opponents, they demonstrate that the way of the cross is always past the worst of evils.

The main requisite for me as well as my students is to learn what is entailed in thinking and living according to the bi-millennial Christian tradition, in all of its rich variety and unplumbed depth. Yet such training in Christianity is impossible apart from the saints who have constituted the worshiping and witnessing Body of Christ.

I should have taught my student that, just as the early Christians were known as a people who didn't kill their babies, so ought he and his girlfriend to seek a Christian community that would help them bring their child to life and eventually to faith. Then we might have been spared our common and terrible failure. Even had they rejected my teaching, I would not have been left halting and blundering about things that really matter.