

Teacher

I have been blessed to have had a number of good and even some great teachers over the course of my life. Nothing in my background predicted that I would be a teacher or that I would love to teach. Neither of my parents graduated from high school and although they wanted me to get an education, like many parents of children born during the Great Depression, they hoped (if they had any such hope at all) I would choose a more conspicuous, lucrative profession like medicine or law.

I entered college (Brigham Young University) with no great ambition, certainly not one that involved advanced study. At the beginning I thought I wanted to be a high school counselor. Each time I took a class in an interesting subject and with a good teacher, I thought I might choose that profession. So, for a time I considered majoring in Geology and later in Psychology, but I actually began majoring in Education—that is, until I found some of the classes uninteresting or boring. It was when, in fulfilling one of my liberal arts requirements, I took “Introduction to Literature” from Professor Robert K. Thomas that I came alive.

Bob, whom I nominated for Teacher of the Year during my first year in graduate school after I had left Brigham Young University, was one of the most gifted teachers I have ever known. I took every class he taught, and I went to hear him lecture in other venues every chance I got. In Bob’s classes I fell in love with literature and with teaching. But it was more than that: Bob saw something in me that I hadn’t even known was there and he befriended and mentored me in ways that I now see shaped not only my intellectual but my spiritual life as well, which I have come to understand is what a great teacher does, whether she intends it or not.

What I learned from Bob Thomas was that I too could learn to read a poem, short story, play or novel, and could read it closely and carefully enough so that I could see not only what others (including him) saw, but beyond that, inspiration and insights that were unique to me. I remember precisely when this happened: Bob has assigned us to read Anton Chekov’s short story, “On the Road,” over Thanksgiving weekend. On a trip home to California, I read the story but had no clue as to what it meant. I concluded, as I actually had on previous assignments, that I was incapable of understanding complex works of literature. Listening to their comments in class, I felt some of my fellow students had a gift for “sounding” a work of literature that I didn’t have—and would never have.

Since I had to find something to say about Chekov’s story, I paid what I considered in those days the ultimate price for an undergraduate—I read the story a second time! That didn’t seem to help much, so I kept reading and re-reading. Suddenly, on one of these readings, I saw this incredible structure, what Henry James calls “the figure in the carpet,” the way imagery, symbolism, plot, setting, and character all come together to reveal not only meaning, but artistry. “Reveal” is the right word here, in the sense that the poet Wallace Stevens intends when he says, “The wonder

and mystery of art, as indeed of religion in the last resort, is the revelation of something ‘wholly other’ by which the inexpressible loneliness of thinking is broken and enriched.”

What I see Bob Thomas was trying to do with/for me—and what I have tried for the past fifty years with my students—was to get me to see, to see further and deeper than I had ever seen before, to learn enough to discriminate among the things I saw (and learned from others) and, ultimately, to come to trust my own intellect and instincts so that I could make informed judgments and pass them on to others.

Bob Thomas taught me what great teaching is all about, and he taught me that great teachers care about their students. Because of Bob’s influence, I went from being a mediocre student to being a very good one. Because of his guidance, I received a prestigious Woodrow Wilson Fellowship and was a finalist for a Danforth Fellowship for graduate study in English. I had other great teachers at BYU (Parley Christensen, Hugh Nibley, Truman Madsen, and others) and at the University of Wisconsin (Madeline Doran, Helen White, Ricardo Quintana, Henry Pochmann, and others), but I never had anyone as influential on my life as Bob Thomas. More than fifty years after I took his classes, I often find myself telling stories he told, teaching literature the way he taught, and, I hope, living my life the way he lived his.

One of the things I learned from Bob was not to take myself too seriously. Bob was a brilliant scholar as well as a gifted teacher, but his teaching was never about him, it was about us, his students. He was a tough and demanding teacher, but he was also very human, always showing us how to keep our scholarly and spiritual lives in balance. Later in graduate school, I was shown another example of such balance. During my first year in graduate school, my fiancé and I decided to drive from Madison, Wisconsin to Los Angeles to get married over spring break. It was a crazy but exhilarating trip and we got home in the middle of the night before the semester resumed. Fatigued and bleary-eyed, I stumbled into my Romantic Literature class the next day only to discover that I had forgotten about a scheduled midterm exam on Byron. I looked at my bluebook and realized that I didn’t have one intelligent thing to say about Byron’s poetry, so I wrote simply but honestly, “Dear Professor Lyon: I’m sorry but I’m totally unprepared to take this exam. I’ve been on my honeymoon over spring break.” I turned in my bluebook along with everyone else and then held my breath until the next class meeting. When I opened my returned bluebook, I saw the following inscription on the cover, “Dear Mr. Rees. I’m sure Byron would understand, after all, life is more important than literature!” I’ve never forgotten that.

When I started teaching at the University of Wisconsin when I was still in graduate school and then later at UCLA, I wanted most of all to create the kind of space for learning and being that Bob Thomas and other teachers had created for me. I wanted my students to love learning and to learn how to keep teaching themselves for the rest of their lives. I heard someone on NPR state that when he was a freshman at Brown University, his Freshman English teacher said to the

class, “The most important book you will read in this class is the first book you choose to read on your own when you graduate in four years.” I understood from this teacher and from all of the teachers I have been blessed to have is that all education should have the goal of teaching us to love learning, to pursue it with passion, to be our own best teachers, to be humble about our own limitations, and to be able to integrate what we learn into our lives so that we are better human beings.

Good teachers don’t try to make their students clones of themselves. As Emerson said to one teacher, “Don’t make that boy another you, one’s enough” (something I first read in one of Bob Thomas’s classes). It is the excitement of learning from my students that has always made every course an adventure.

I stayed in touch with Bob Thomas over the years. In some ways, I think I disappointed him, in the ways that sons sometimes disappoint their fathers. The writers he had introduced me to—Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Hawthorne, Shakespeare and others, including the great writers of the Hebrew Bible—had led me to a more liberal stance in terms of our shared religious heritage than I think he was comfortable with. When, as the editor of Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, I made the decision to publish Lester Bush Jr.’s ground-breaking article “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: An Historical Overview,” Bob called and warned me that doing so would earn me the opprobrium of Church leaders and possibly my membership in the Church. I did not take his warning lightly and in fact wrestled with the decision considerably because of it. Nevertheless, I decided to go against his counsel, not because of any wish to be oppositional or out of any sense of rebellion, but because I felt it was the most morally responsible thing I could do. Nevertheless, I was sorry that it was a point of conflict between us.

I went to see Bob not long before he passed away. It was a joyful meeting, one in which we embraced and expressed our love for one another. I was grateful for the opportunity to thank him for the profound influence he had had on my life. In many ways, he was a surrogate father to me; certainly, he shaped my life in ways that my own father was incapable of doing. To have had such a teacher has been one of the great blessings of my life. I only hope that in my own way, I can be such a blessing in the lives of my own students.