

FINDING THE WAY POINT

Education and the American Dream

BY RICHARD DREYFUSS

THANK YOU. I'd be a liar if I told you that I'd never had a fantasy of getting a standing ovation from a room full of teachers.... The reality is far better than the fantasy.

First of all, I'd like to thank Mr. Shanker, not only for his very kind introduction and for the wonderful column that he wrote about me and about *Mr. Holland's Opus*, but for the work that he has done over

the last thirty years. The strange puzzle of being a teacher in America—the fact that teachers are the most respected and disrespected people in our community—is something that Mr. Shanker has struggled with better than most. I appreciate that.

Second, I just want to make sure, is Gladys Wilcox here? Gladys Wilcox? Okay. As long as she's not here, I can tell you the story.

Gladys Wilcox was a teacher of mine at Horace Mann Elementary School. She was also a humorless, impatient, frustrating, bitter, rotten human being.

So after I left school, after I left her class, I never thought about her again. About twenty years later, I was having a conversation with a friend of mine. We were reminiscing about elementary school, when all of a sudden it occurred to me that many of the things that I had come to love in my life—Shakespeare, history, reading literature—had all come out of this woman's class. And I was struck by the fact that she had—you know—not liked me very much and had not seemed to encourage me much. But she got the job done.

Richard Dreyfuss, an Academy Award-winning actor, starred as music teacher Glen Holland in last year's hit film, Mr. Holland's Opus. This is the text of his August 4 address to the AFT's 1996 national convention in Cincinnati, Ohio.



The author as high school music teacher Glen Holland in a scene from Mr. Holland's Opus.

And so I tracked her down. I found her in a retirement home in southern California. I called her up. She answered the phone, and I said, "Mrs. Wilcox, you won't remember me. My name is Richard Dreyfuss. I was a student of yours at Horace Mann Elementary, and I just want you to know that many of the things I've come to love in my life, I learned in

your class." She said, "Thank you, very much," and hung up.

... There's a point to that story, but I also had a teacher by the name of Rose Jane Landau—may she rest in peace—who taught a class in drama when I was a teenager. She happened to gather together the greatest collection of neurotic, misfit, outcast children that has ever been brought together in one place at any time.

She was also, like Gladys Wilcox, a great teacher. She was great because she allowed us to believe that we were, in fact, as talented as we thought we were.

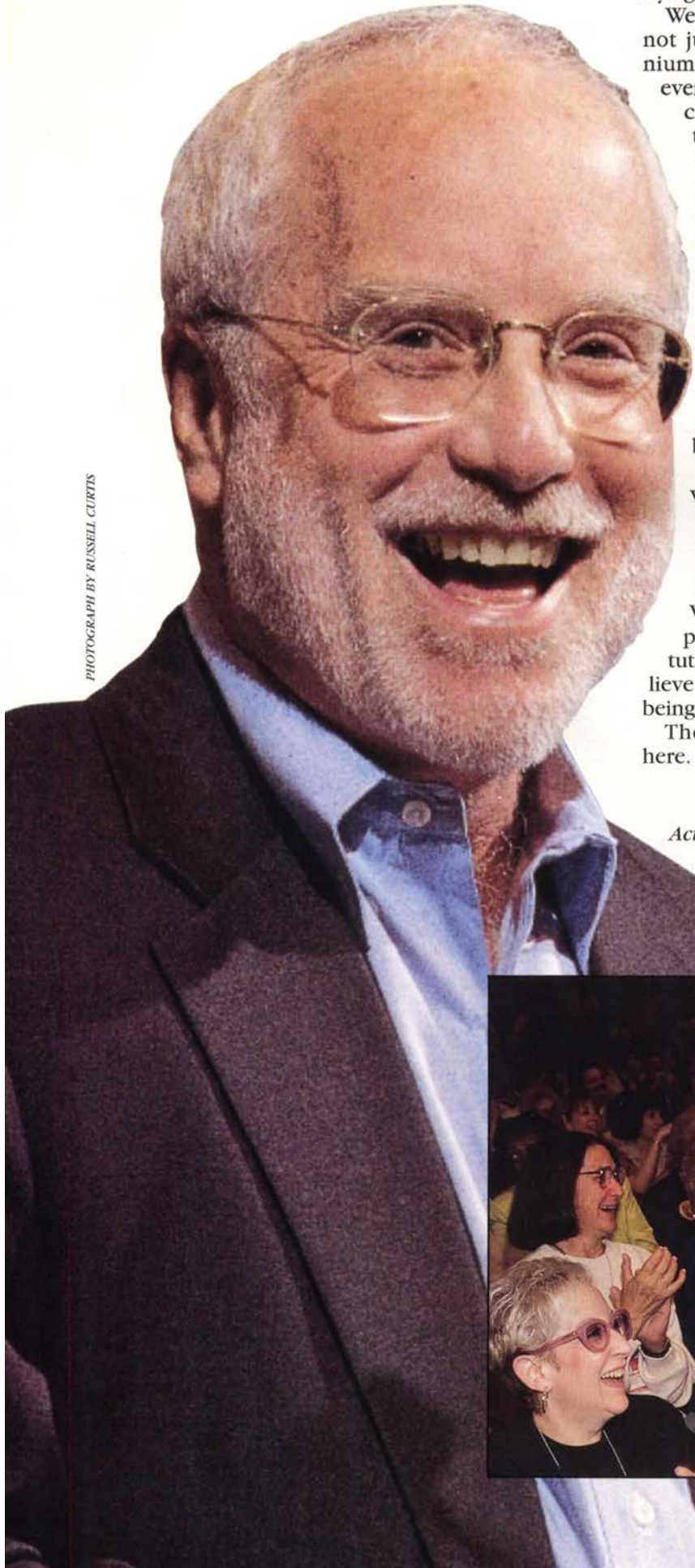
Those were not the only great teachers I had, but they represent polar opposite approaches that both led to great teaching and grateful students. And wherever they are, I thank them.

Mr. Holland's Opus was also about a guy struggling to become a good teacher and a good person. And it was about a larger debate within American society over what is valuable and important to us as a people.

What touched people in the film, why they responded so strongly, points to certain fundamental values in America—certain aspirations and longings that are not currently being fulfilled, that we, in an odd way, have walked away from.

Pilots, as they take off, focus on a point on the horizon called the "way point." You fly fine until you reach that point. Then you must re-focus, locate a new way

PHOTOGRAPH BY RUSSELL CURTIS



point on the horizon and re-adjust your instruments to fly again with confidence.

We are now at a unique turning point in America; not just because we approach the end of a millennium—although there is psychological power, and even anxiety, in reaching the year 2000 in Western civilization—and not just because by prevailing in the Cold War, we lost the security of an external enemy. Add to that thirty years of unceasingly negative events: from assassinations to the Vietnam War, from the oil embargo to Watergate and the drug epidemic—all of which created a permanent, undying suspicion from all sides in this country toward the government and its institutions.

The moorings we had in a certain set of values and beliefs seem to have broken free. We seem, for the first time, to be without a way point. We are adrift, insecure, and frightened. Our sense of common purpose and destiny has been deeply eroded.

But there is a new and dangerous deal here. If we lose faith in ourselves, in our institutions, it bodes particularly ill because we are tied to our country in a unique way. We are not the French or the Italians or anyone else held together by geography and ancestry and common culture. We are tied to the abstracts of freedom and opportunity and the themes expressed in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights—and if we cease to believe in these things, what's the point of being an American?

The ties that bind are more invisible here. We have no common culture to fall

Actor Richard Dreyfuss, one of the many prominent endorsers of the AFT Lessons for Life campaign, roused the audience with this address to the AFT's 1996 national convention.



back on, no unified version of history, no monolithic tale shared by all. Our foods, our gods, our marriage customs—everything here is various and different. We are connected only by those yearnings that are intangible.

We are about hope, and faith in our future. The future, in fact, has been the one constant in the history of America. John Quincy Adams said of those who were thinking of taking the extraordinary step of emigration, "They must cast off their European skin, never to resume it. They must look toward their posterity rather than backward to their ancestors." The essence of America is a commitment to an unbounded future of achievable dreams.

But now we have limited those hopes. Our belief in our future has been shaken. And all the dreams that each generation has passed on to its children are not shared by us. Our kids, we truly believe, will have to make do with less.

We are without a way point, and we feel all our resources are bankrupt.

We have forgotten that we are the richest nation on earth. We act as if we are poor and struggling and miserly, and those who have more than others are committed merely to hanging on to it. How else can we explain this drumbeat of rejection for school budgets, health care for our people, safe bridges, enough parks?

Our new mean-spiritedness denies the very heart and soul of our culture: We are

denies the very heart and soul of our culture: We are the pursuit of happiness; about opportunity, achievement, can-do generosity. For everyone. For each of us.

Yet the real and greatest enemy we face as the millennium draws near is the rejection of hope, optimism, and faith in the American ideals that bind us, that are our very essence.

Ladies and gentlemen, we need a new way point, and we are going to have to look to ourselves to find it, individually and collectively. We must look to the story that is and has been America.

I am convinced we can turn this around.

But it will take passion and work. You, the teachers of America, know this better than anyone.

I believe that the powerful public reaction to *Mr. Holland's Opus* speaks to this. Why did Mr. Holland strike such a deep chord in Americans? Because they love their teachers, and because they cherish their memories of those times.

They long for those times, precisely

because they seemed to have had a way point. We knew who we were and where we wanted to go—as a people, as a nation. And there seemed to be objective indications that we could actually get there. And even our challenges seemed clear, often winnable, and occasionally noble—good jobs, two-car garages, women's rights, democracy versus totalitarianism, space exploration, civil rights.

And they remember their teachers. Sure, parents want their kids to be able to go to college and get a good job. But that is not enough. They want teachers who help their kids to understand life and its meaning. They want them to understand who we Americans are and how we should express our character in words and actions. And, I believe, people, as they watched this movie, unconsciously recognized the importance of a complete education, from math, science, and history to art and music.

Perhaps we've all misunderstood the reason we learn music and all the arts in the first place. It is not only so a student can learn the clarinet, or another student can take an acting lesson. It is that for hundreds of years it has been known that teaching the arts, along with history and math and biology, helps to create "The Well-Rounded Mind" that Western civilization and America have been grounded on. America's greatest achievements—in science, in business, in popular culture—simply would not have been attainable without an education that encourages achievement in all fields. We need that "Well-Rounded Mind" now. For it is from creativity and imagination that the solutions to our political and social problems will come.

The society that doesn't teach its children the richest expressions of history and culture doesn't give its kids the real tools of expression: powerful and dramatic words, compelling images, music, and song. That society is defrauding and ultimately destroying itself.

You, teachers, educators here today, would consider it an honor and a duty, I know, to be a part of the process of establishing a new way point for our children. They need—we all need—to believe again in our future, in our possibilities, in what brought us all this way, together, as Americans.

We need to remind our kids, remind ourselves, of the importance of where we come from. Of course, we have to teach children to read and write and make them functioning members of something other than an unquestioning work force, but we also have to seduce them, we have to propagandize them, we have to brainwash them into a love affair with the American idea. We have to paint a picture of republican democracy that is as romantic and irresistible as it really is. We have to teach our children our history, our mythology, our culture with passion, with wit, with rigor. And by doing that, we create the possibility of that civic virtue that ties a thinking individual into his or her present community.

Teach them the value of commitment and creativity and the simple endurance of people like Glen Holland. Teach them of the need for the shared belief that our schools are a primary source for character and courage.

Teach them these things, and they will know how to find their way point. □



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