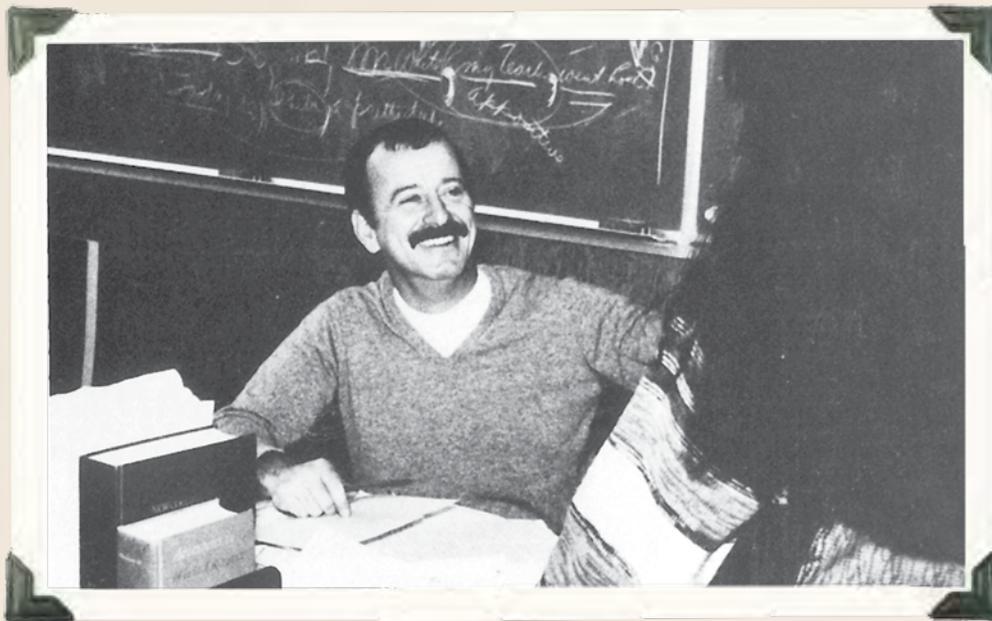


I'll Never Forget Mr. White

A Teacher's Legacy



BY ANDY WADDELL

A man died last summer. At 78, he was neither old enough nor young enough for his passing to make news. His obituary was two paragraphs long. The *San Jose Mercury News* simply stated that Edward A. White was survived by “his brother Mike, his sister Mary and his many loving nieces and nephews.” Like Willy Loman, he “never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper.” Only one short line from his obit showed the gap that separates Ed from the fictional salesman. “As a passionate High School English Teacher” the *Mercury* put it, he “leaves a far reaching legacy of kindness, love and the pursuit of life-long learning.”

I am part of that legacy.

Ed was one of those legendary figures—it seems every school has one—who, sticking fast year after year like an axis of the earth, become almost synonymous with the institution itself, in this case San Jose High School. Every year, he sat with the graduates upon the platform, an honor voted by the students; every alumnus who returned to speak to the students called him out by name and devoted a few kind comments to

Andy Waddell teaches English at Santa Clara High School in Santa Clara, California. He has worked as a high school teacher and administrator for 25 years. Photo of Edward A. White (above) courtesy of the author.

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“Mr. White.” The words “I’ll never forget” figured prominently in these tributes.

Lately, it feels like not only are public schools and teachers’ unions under attack but so is the value of teaching itself, or at least teaching as a creative act, the way the old masters like Ed White did it. More and more emphasis is placed on standardized tests, “scripted lessons” are sold to districts as being “teacher-proof,” and politicians rise to power by promising to fight teachers’ interests. In this context (and just after battling a class of 39 freshmen seventh period and feeling once again like just hanging it up for good), I found myself reading the “guest book” on legacy.com, a tribute message board with comments like, “I am one of the countless former students whose life was forever changed by the wisdom, kindness and generosity of Mr. White” (Sylvia French Kennedy, class of 1986). Soon I began pondering a question I should have thought about 25 years ago when I entered this profession: What does it mean to be a great teacher?

I’m not alone in wondering about this. In 2009, headlines proclaimed that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation planned to spend \$45 million to find out what makes a great teacher. In a pithy, withering piece in *Education Week*, retired teacher James D. Starkey offered to save them a lot of time and trouble (in exchange for the \$45 mil) by answering the question right now, without the benefit of formal research. He said a great teacher: “(1) has a sense of humor; (2) is intuitive; (3) knows the subject matter; (4) listens well; (5) is articulate; (6) has an obsessive/compulsive side; (7) can



be subversive; (8) is arrogant enough to be fearless; (9) has a performer's instincts; (10) is a real taskmaster."

Ed fit all 10 of these categories perfectly, but I would add "(11) likes kids." I suspect Mr. Starkey found this one too obvious to bother listing, but I think it's worth noting. I've never known a great teacher, or even a good one, who didn't get a charge out of the "kidness" of kids—the vibrancy of youth, the terrible, beautiful energy that frightens so many adults. The most pervasive, well-meaning platitude we in the teaching profession hear year after year from politicians, and even the public at large, is that "our children are our future." For us teachers, however, our children are our present. They are not adults-in-waiting but complete individuals with insights and idiosyncrasies all their own.

That is why the fourth item on Starkey's list, listening, is so important. When I was an 18-year-old community college student, one of my classmates was a middle-aged man who had dropped out of an engineering career and was starting over, studying poetry. I'll never forget the way he listened, staring straight at me with a Zen-like stillness that was almost scary. I commented on it, and he said, very slowly and deliberately, "Well, Andy, you know things that no one else knows." I was startled and, ironically, dumbstruck. The quality of his listening made me begin to listen to myself. No teacher can listen like that to 150 students a day, but the great ones find a way, from time to time, to give their undivided attention, to hear a kid the way we all want to be heard.

I repeat this story to my sophomores to introduce an essay assignment that requires them to use an incident from their lives to reflect on a universal idea. We read some authors who have managed to squeeze meaning from ordinary events, and I tell my classes, "The incident doesn't matter; it's what you make of it. Everyone in this room has enough experience to fill a book; it just depends on how you look at it." I stand on chairs and crouch in the back to demonstrate *perspective*. "You see things in a way that no one else sees them," I say. "You know things that no one else knows." And they nod; they know it's true.

The listening skill all great teachers share, no matter what their subject matter, is a finely tuned capacity for distinguish-

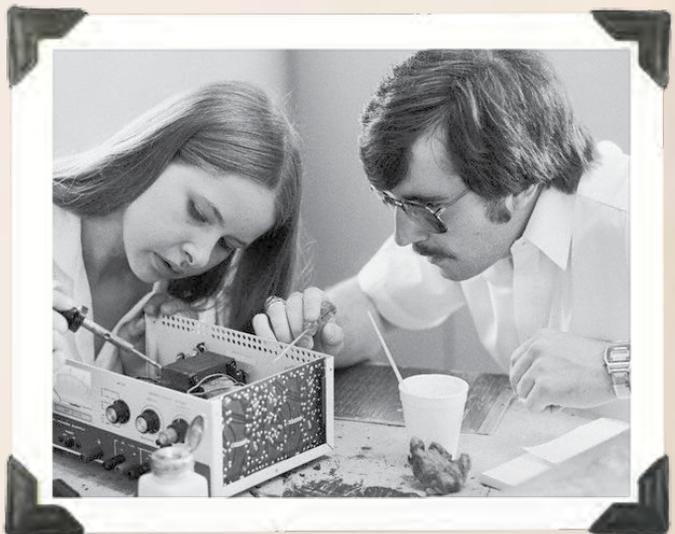
ing differences in student voices. They can tell whether a student who asks to use the restroom should be given permission, told to wait, or taken out in the hall and quietly asked, "What's wrong?" They can hear the difference between teasing and banter. Most important, they sense the exact line between productive chatter and pointless noise, and (amazingly to me after 25 years of trying) are able to instantaneously draw the class back across the line to where they should be.

Even more difficult is teaching students to listen, not just to be quiet. I remember in third grade, dear old Mrs. Trolinger helping me with something while the rest of the class worked on. Suddenly, she stopped, finger to her lips, although for once I was successfully using my inside voice. "Shhh," she said, so intently and so quietly that I strained my ears, expect-

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ing something extraordinary. All I could hear was the creaking of desks, the scratching of pencils on three-lined paper, maybe a quick whisper for a borrowed eraser. I looked back at her, puzzled. "These are classroom sounds," she said simply, and we both kept quiet, sharing the moment. I had no idea why she did it, and even now can only guess. Was she feeling proud, pleased with the success of her own classroom management? Was she trying to demonstrate what quiet was for an awkward, loud boy who had very little control over his own voice? At the time, all I thought was "Boy, this lady really likes to hear kids work." Maybe I was right.

Mr. Starkey predicts failure for the researchers from the Gates Foundation, concluding, "Great teaching is not quantifi-



able.... Great teaching happens by magic." True, perhaps, but not very helpful for those of us in the trenches trying to improve. To be fair, the Gates people never claimed to be after the lofty secret of great teaching. They are actually seeking the more likely and more helpful goal of "effective" teaching. In this pursuit, they have already videotaped more than 13,000 lessons, which they are analyzing, correlating effectiveness against a number of measures, including student feedback, to find a more rigorous, reliable measure of teacher effectiveness than looking only at student test scores. The preliminary results are really quite heartening for teachers. Most notably, they have found that good teachers tend to be effective no matter what classes they are assigned, they do very little "test prep," relying instead on "cognitively challenging tasks," and they tend to use writing instruction, even in math classes. They also score much higher on student surveys that ask students to rank their agreement with the statements "My teacher in this class makes me feel that s/he really cares about me" and "My teacher really tries to understand how students feel about things."

These two qualities, challenging and caring, are the two most basic aspects of teaching. The first is difficult to measure, the second nearly impossible. Researchers from the Consortium on Chicago School Research labeled these two strands "academic press" and "social support," and showed that both factors were vital for the success (measured by test scores) of middle schoolers in Chicago's poorer neighborhoods. In short, students do better when they are pushed, but also when they feel that adults care about them.

Elementary teachers are typically better at the latter. They hug and hold more often than they yell and scold, and they find ways even in large classes to make students feel special and, more important, competent (often by making chores seem like rewards). Many of us remember clapping erasers more vividly than we remember learning the state capitals.

The single most memorable event of my elementary career was the day, long after school hours had ended, when the custodian, Mr. Dalky, invested my friend Danny Larson and me with the awesome responsibility of helping him take down the flag. Even after explaining how terrible it would be if the Stars and Stripes should touch the unholy ground, he still trusted us to grab it as it descended the pole, and then showed us step by step the correct and only way to fold that sacred cloth into a neat triangle. And then he thanked us.

Mr. Dalky was my teacher that day, part of the village I didn't realize was raising me.

College, the other end of the academic road, can seem like

"Yes," Ed would say, "I think that makes sense. I've never heard it put quite like that." Students thought Mr. White was brilliant because they felt brilliant in his class.

all academic press and no support to those fresh from the safe confines of high school, and that is not a bad thing. My son, a student at San Francisco State University, reports back to me, "College is just like high school, except the teachers don't care. They don't care if you do the assignments; they don't care if you're there; they really don't care." All this he says happily, an amazed grin on his face. He knows he is being treated like an adult for the first time in his life, and he is loving it.

The great professor, unlike the great teacher of younger students, need not even know his students' names; in fact,



anonymity might even come in handy. Dr. John Hospers, professor of philosophy at the University of Southern California and the first libertarian presidential candidate, once stopped a class discussion in its tracks, took off his horn-rimmed glasses, leaned across the podium, pointed directly at me, and said slowly, "That is slogan thinking, which is NO THINKING AT ALL!" Afterward, students I didn't even know came up to me and asked me how I was doing. True, I fumed a bit, searching my mind for a snappy comeback, but in a way

I found it liberating. After being told for years that there are no wrong answers and gaining an inflated opinion of myself, it was strangely refreshing to be brought down a peg. Besides, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the professor was completely right. I became known as "the guy Hospers hates" and friends were flummoxed by my good grade in the class. "He has no idea who I am," I explained.

Such a strategy would never work with high school students. It's been said that teenagers are only interested in one subject: themselves. Show an interest in that subject and they might walk a little way up the mountain of education. Still, this only goes so far. While we'd all like to make it to the top, it's very tempting to stay in the meadow with our feet in the stream. The "nice teacher" will let you stay there; the "cool teacher" will climb in with you; the great teacher has the force of will to say, "I know your feet hurt—let's climb together." As Salvador Benavides (class of 1981) put it, Mr. White "chal-

lenged us to work harder and aim higher than we ever imagined.”

Ed was my teacher, but I never sat in his class; I was down the hall busily scrubbing “INXS” and “XTC” off desks between rounds of searching for pronoun antecedents and girding my loins for another go at the Queen Mab speech. I can’t even call Ed my mentor, in the typical sense. We did not meet; we chatted. He seldom shared materials with me; in fact, he had few materials to share. Ed started teaching long before the Xerox machine, saw no hardship for students in copying lengthy examples from the blackboard, and loathed the fill-in dittos so ubiquitous in those days. His main method of instruction seemed to be the discussion, an activity he could stretch out for a 50-minute period if the kids were engaged, and they usually were.

In those days, as a young teacher, I hungered for help. I was as yet unused to the isolation of teaching. Older colleagues were nice, but there was no time built in for sharing resources and ideas. I remember creating a vocabulary list for *Julius Caesar* and pondering the absurdity that I was sitting in a 50-year-old building, in a 100-year-old school where a 400-year-old play had been taught thousands of times, and no one could just hand me a list of words. I kept thinking of a line from Brecht’s play *Mother Courage*, in which the army recruiter says the commander is looking for some brave men to enlist. Mother Courage comments that he must be a very bad commander, saying, “If his plan of campaign was any good, why would he need *brave* soldiers, wouldn’t plain, ordinary soldiers do? Whenever there are great virtues, it’s a sure sign something’s wrong.” Already, I was giving up on my ambition to be a brave soldier in the fight against ignorance; I couldn’t see great virtue in myself, but still I couldn’t understand why an educated, reasonably intelligent person should be having such a difficult time becoming just a plain, ordinary soldier. I couldn’t fathom why I had to have four different preps, why I was assigned most of the remedial students, why I was left to fend for myself as if I really were the competent, confident person I had pretended to be in my interview. It was clear to me that the system needed to change. I don’t think I would have liked “scripted lessons,” but I wanted something



to rely on, as opposed to the “sink or swim” attitude of the day, even though it was a crucible that occasionally forged the great teacher. Today, mentorship programs for new teachers are more common, thankfully, and materials are available at the click of a mouse, but still we devote precious little time to collaborating, to mining our greatest resource: the skilled professionals in our own buildings.

I don’t believe Ed was keeping secrets from me. He wasn’t one of those who want others to fail so their own success will seem even more miraculous. No, I think for him, teaching was neither science nor art—it was an extension of the self. Advising fellow teachers seemed to him to be not only intrusive but

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insulting, like telling someone how to love.

That is not to say he was without opinions—far from it; he could be smug, even sanctimonious, maddeningly self-assured as so many great teachers are. I distinctly remember an argument about the meaning of the Latin motto *de gustibus non est disputandum* and the definition of the word “taste.” To Ed, “Taste” was a capital-letter distinction that denoted the accumulated appreciation of the best of culture. To dislike, say, Shakespeare did not mean that one had different taste; it meant that one had no taste at all. To Ed, matters of taste were beyond disputing because they were settled issues.

I’ve noticed that many great teachers have this quality of certainty. In the classroom, they can bend to coax ideas from callow minds, allowing arguments to flourish, ideas to be



challenged, all the while subtly leading the students along a winding but definite path. They can ask questions as if they've just thought of them, as if the subject under study had never before been understood, and when they get the answer they were looking for, they stand awestruck, eyes widening, and let the moment sink in. The class senses something has happened. "Yes," Ed would say, "I think that makes sense. I've never heard it put quite like that." Students thought Mr. White was brilliant because they felt brilliant in his class.

It wasn't easy to teach kids who had been in Ed's classes. One of the most dispiriting moments of my career came when I overheard two of my best students discussing the A papers I had just returned. They were talking about how measly and uninteresting their essays were and reminiscing about the lengthy, thought-provoking essays they had written as freshmen in Mr. White's class two years before. The same girls once told me that an assignment we were doing, a somewhat simplistic analysis of a piece of literature, "would have made Mr. White throw up." I learned early on that "But Mr. White said..." was the beginning of an argument I could not win. He had transferred his certainty onto them.

With adults this certainty could take on forms that were somewhat more abrupt. I saw Ed turn his back, literally, on a colleague who disagreed with him about a union issue. And God knows you didn't want to be his boss! He was a thorn in the side of dozens of principals and assistant principals, resisting wave after wave of "reform" with an almost pathological distrust of administrators, most of whom he considered to be just plain stupid. His attitude, and recurrent threat, when endless committees and planning meetings seemed to him to be wrongheaded, was to say, "I'm just going to close my door and teach."

And that is exactly what he did, year after year, in a community that transformed from the quiet downtown of an agricultural area to the blighted ghetto of a major metropolis. The world around him changed, but behind those closed doors, in the world he could control, nothing was different. The names might be Juan and Maria instead of John and Mary, but nothing could alter Ed's perfect faith in young people, his blessed assurance of the potential inside the same kids who

were being written off in the media as violent and lazy—the blackboard jungle so feared at the time. He believed that the same writers who had spoken to him when he was a poor, working-class youth in Detroit could speak to the teased-hair, tight-skirted *cholas* and baggy-pants *vatos*, could transform them as he had been transformed.

Ed told me more than once a story about his own high school years. He was a ninth-grader working on an assignment about subordination in Sister Theonela's class. Words such as "Fleetwoods," "convertibles," "cars," and "Cadillacs" were supposed to be reordered from general to specific. Young Ed was having trouble and the teacher, trying to help, pointed at the word "cars" and asked, "Can you see that this group is bigger than the others?" Ed replied that he couldn't, and the teacher just placed a hand upon his shoulder and said, "You will," before moving on to the next kid.

Those two words, "You will," sum up Ed's philosophy, and really that of all great teachers. For many of us, the message we send is "You may." We present the material and if the students want to learn, it's up to them. On our better days, of course, we say "You can." It would be a poor teacher indeed who never sent that message. "You can do it!" we cheer them on, "You can do it!" And when they do, we feel vicarious triumph, which is sometimes a byproduct of surprise. Perhaps we weren't so sure they could do it after all.

"You will" takes it to another level. Said one way, with a pat on the back, it is an affirmation of faith, an absolute belief in the potential of the student. Said another way, accompanied by the famous teacher stare, "a gaze blank and pitiless as the sun," it's the order of an autocrat. It states, in the words of one of my fellow teachers, "I don't play." Every great teacher knows how to send both messages, sometimes simultaneously.

Ed had another story about Sister Theonela. He had written a little essay, a response to the reading. It was riddled with errors, according to Ed, but the teacher took him aside and said, "You have interesting insights. You should consider becoming an English teacher." It seemed an absurd thing to say to a boy growing up on the wrong side of Detroit whose mother sewed seats at the Ford factory. Ed thought she was crazy; everyone knew his future was down at the auto plant. He kept the paper anyway. Many times in his own teaching career, he told me, he reread that page, asking himself what his teacher saw, and whether he would be able to see it in his students' papers. "I don't think I would have seen it," he told me.

This was one of the few times I believe Ed was guilty of false modesty. He would have seen it; he saw it again and again in hundreds, thousands of students over the years. As former student Yolanda Guerra (class of 1986) posted, "He always had an open ear and heart. He instilled in me a desire and passion for learning and the capacity to ask tough questions.... He was a true teacher who saw that every student had the ability to succeed." Ms. Guerra is a teacher herself now at Downtown College Prep, a charter school a few miles from her old high school. She went on to say, "I honor him every day as I walk into my own classroom of high school students hoping that I have the same passion with my students that he had with us."

And the legacy continues. □