

Teaching moments: Hard truths

by [William H. Willimon](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

Whatever you do, for God's sake don't ask a question in class, that really makes Holmer mad," said the older, wiser graduate student. This was my only preparation for entering Paul Holmer's legendary class on Søren Kierkegaard at Yale Divinity School.

Sure enough, at the end of the first session, after a wonderful lecture on SK's early years, giving the impression that he actually knew Kierkegaard from his days as a student in Minnesota, Holmer looked out at the class and asked, "Questions?"

A pompous student stood and asked a long, rambling, self-important question about SK's intellectual influences.

Holmer stared in silence at the student, then looked out over the classroom and asked, "Are there other questions?" The student slumped down into his chair. Class was over. That was the last question that semester.

Holmer didn't teach Kierkegaard. He *was* Kierkegaard. Master of sardonic humor and ironic wit, lover of the enigmatic insight, the paradoxical phrase, he made every class an adventure. One did not only learn about Kierkegaard under Holmer; one began to think about things as if one were Kierkegaard.

The year was 1969, and we were in the throes of a great national upheaval, or at least what we regarded as a great upheaval. We students were impressed with our marches and demonstrations and all the changes we were forcing upon a backward world.

Holmer was unimpressed. The way he figured it, the only change worth noting was when Almighty God slipped into the world as an unlettered Jew—a transformation we have been avoiding ever since.

One night the whole divinity school gathered in the common room to hear Holmer and our great hero, William Sloane Coffin, debate the role of the pastor. I don't know why someone invited Holmer to such a debate; like SK, he was generally

contemptuous of clergy.

Coffin opened with an exciting exposition of the pastor as agent of social change. “Because you visit and work with people in a variety of settings, you can organize them to work for justice. You will have important people in your churches—bankers, lawyers. You can do much good getting folk motivated to get together and work great change in your community.”

When it came time for him to respond, Holmer said, “I disagree with about everything that Bill has said. Your job can’t be to organize people, to bring them together. People hide in groups. It’s one of their best defenses against God. Your job as a pastor is to break up the groups, strip them naked, render them exposed and vulnerable. That way God can get to them. Besides, Jesus despised bankers and lawyers.”

Though that was opposed to just about everything that we believed at that time about ministry, and though I was mostly ignorant about what it took to be a pastor, I knew Holmer had it right.

When a pioneering feminist theologian gave a lecture on the rise of feminist theology, noting how at last the church had progressed to where women could appropriately name the nature of their bondage and rise above their enslavement, we applauded, but Holmer could be heard walking out muttering, “By God, I’ll not have anybody insult my mother!”

Soon after I became a professor I was thrilled to see that Holmer was coming to Duke to lecture. I eagerly awaited him at the hall where he was to speak. When he appeared with his hosts, I rushed up and said something like, “Professor Holmer, remember me? I was in your Kierkegaard class. Wrote a paper on Kierkegaard and preaching. You encouraged me to publish the paper. I did. And maybe as a result of that class paper I’m now here, teaching at Duke Divinity School.”

Holmer looked at me and all he said was, “No, I don’t remember you.”

Which brings me to the main thing that Holmer taught me about teaching: Good teaching requires teachers to engage students, to reach out to students, to get close to students. But really great teaching demands that professors put some distance between themselves and their students. Students can be seductive. Like the rest of us, they don’t want to change because change, rebirth, rethinking can be painful.

Students tempt us to degrade the subject matter and trim our sails to suit their self-imposed limits. Teachers have to make room for students to step back from their preconceptions and prejudices and wander in unknown territory. This space, this distance between teacher and student, is a prerequisite for transformation. When we are alone, stripped of our defenses, exposed to the demanding truth, enlightenment can happen to us, not as our heroic achievement, but as the result of a teacher's heroic willingness to stand against us in service to the truth.

Holmer loved his subject more than us. He served us by wanting to coax us on a journey that we would not have taken on our own. He embodied his subject matter and stood before us, stood against us in a way that the truth of his subject deserved.

I left full-time teaching in great part because I was not courageous enough, not tethered to the truth enough, to teach like Paul Holmer.

One cold January day, lecturing at Luther Seminary, I was terrified to see Holmer being wheeled in for my talk ("Why Lutherans Can't Evangelize"). He looked frail, but I feared that his leonine brain was as robust as ever. I gave my lecture. Then I waited in line with others to greet him. When I stood before him, he said, "Well, you have done well for yourself. See? We weren't right about you at YDS after all. What do faculty know?" He said it with a grin.

"Er, uh, right," I responded.

"Still, you've got a lot to learn about Lutherans, don't you?"

It was Holmer's last lesson to me. He died this past year, leaving this world for another. Considering how ill suited he was to this world, it must have been a short trip.

I hear that at his retirement banquet, after various faculty had spoken of him in glowing terms, the honoree was asked to respond. Holmer rose and read a short letter that he had received, saying that this was "my most treasured compliment to my teaching." The letter was from a young man who said that Holmer had changed his life, that his teaching had made a world of difference to his spiritual development.

After reading the letter, Holmer sat down, saying only, "That young man is in jail serving a life sentence for murdering his father."