Teaching moments: Energetic listening

by William C. Placher in the February 22, 2005 issue

When I arrived at Yale more than 30 years ago to do graduate work in theology, I soon heard other students urging that I take a course with David Kelsey. Even as an undergraduate I had already learned an important lesson: to get the best education, don't pay much attention to the topics of the courses; find out who the good teachers are and take whatever they happen to be teaching. So I soon signed up for a Kelsey seminar.

He remains the best discussion leader I've ever encountered. Most remarkable was his ability to make clear the structure of a discussion. "Student A made this point, but ten minutes ago Student B made that point. They would seem to be in contradiction. But back at the beginning of class Student C made another point. Does that offer a way out?"

Well, yes, it turned out, it opened up at least three alternatives, and then we'd move on to discuss the advantages and weaknesses of each of them. And so it went, for two hours of class.

We were amazed that we had managed to have such a finely tuned discussion, clarifying all the issues and options so well. But we never would have seen all those connections without David Kelsey to help us discern them. He exemplified the kind of teacher described in Robertson Davies's novel *The Rebel Angels*, which contains the best single sentence I know about teaching: "To instruct calls for energy, and to remain almost silent, but watchful and helpful, while students instruct themselves, calls for even greater energy."

Students sometimes complain, "Professor X is just too smart to be a good teacher; he (or she) soars above us, and we can't keep up." I think they are wrong; you cannot be too smart to be a good teacher. Kelsey provides evidence of my point. It's hard to imagine anyone with a better analytical mind, and it is all brought to bear in service of his teaching. But all that keen intellect does not make things harder; it

makes them clearer.

I think that's true of teaching generally. My own failures as a teacher, I find, often come because I didn't quite understand the text myself, or because only after the discussion did I see where we could have taken the issues. I wasn't smart *enough*.

It can be useful to help students relax and have fun. The friendships which emerge between teachers and students are one of the great rewards of the academic life. But these are means to an end, not the end itself. The end is learning: learning the subject, learning skills, learning the practices which cultivate intellectual virtues.

I remember a hilarious conversation in Kelsey's office just before the oral examination on my dissertation proposal. I was nervous, and he helped me relax with ever wilder stories of past exams, including his own (e.g., Julian Hartt listening to the first answer in an oral exam, taking a long puff on his cigar, and saying, "Well, that was wrong. Who wants to ask the next question?").

But that conversation was the exception. We never grew that close. My memories of him are not particularly warm and fuzzy. They have to do with *learning*.

Helping out at the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, I have had occasion to reflect on good teaching and how to develop better teaching. David Kelsey is one of the leaders in the field. He was one of the original members of the editorial board of the center's journal, *Teaching Theology and Religion*. He led conversations about teaching among a group of young faculty members at Yale Divinity School which have provided a model for other institutions. With the support of the Lilly Endowment, he has written two important books on theological education, *Between Athens and Berlin* and *To Understand God Truly*. But to his students, his practice may be more important than his preaching. He has not just talked about how to teach well; he has done it.

How do you make better teachers? Sometimes purely technical advice can help. Talk louder—the students in the back couldn't hear you. When you introduce an unfamiliar name or term, write it down so students will get it correctly and know how to spell it. Plan the class so you don't run out of time at the end. Such advice can seem so simple that we are embarrassed to give it, but it can make a lot of difference in teaching and learning.

Most development as a teacher, however, comes from cultivating intellectual virtues. In leading a seminar, really listen to your students, to the questions they ask, the arguments they make, the assumptions behind what they say. Make it clear that you consider the work of the class important. Passion is wonderful, but emotional expressions of your passion for teaching or for the topic at hand can seem pretty phony if you are not on time, organized and thoroughly prepared. If the subject really matters, then you have thought about it a lot, continue to think about it, and have no plans to stop thinking about it in the future.

These are qualities David Kelsey has always brought to the classroom. The students of another great theology teacher, Bernard Lonergan, might summarize the matter with Lonergan's famous four principles: be attentive, be intelligent, be rational, be responsible. That is not a bad list, but our teachers at Yale taught us another principle—be suspicious of systems—so I would rather keep my list of a teacher's virtues unsystematic and ad hoc.

But I do deliberately talk of "virtues" rather than "skills." It isn't just good technique. One has to become in some ways—not in every way, but in some ways—a better person in order to be a better teacher. Different teachers manifest different virtues. Hans Frei—Kelsey's teacher and mine—loved us and led us to love him and changed our lives in ways that have not been Kelsey's style, but he was not, to tell the truth, a great discussion leader. His pedagogical and personal virtues were different. Some great teachers may well be, in other aspects of their lives, disreputable people. But they will have to have some virtues if they are good teachers.

At the end of this year, David Kelsey retires after 40 years of teaching at Yale. It is an honor to salute him as a wonderful, virtuous teacher.