

Changing lives: Great teachers

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue

I loved reading in this issue about great teachers, teachers who have a way of changing lives. I found it impossible not to think about the teachers who changed me. My best college teacher was Sid Wise, professor of government at Franklin and Marshall College. He was short, funny, brilliant and engaging. I had done well in high school without exerting myself, something teachers always pointed out to my parents: “Doesn’t work up to his potential.” I wrote my first blue book exam for Professor Wise with breezy self-confidence. My life changed when the tests were returned. Wise wrote: “Mr. Buchanan: Lincoln said, ‘You can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you can’t fool me at all.’ D-.”

I was stunned, angry, insulted, humiliated—and converted. When I went to talk to him and explained that nothing like this had ever happened to me, he said, “You’re not working hard enough. You weren’t prepared. Work harder. Prepare better. You’ll get better grades.”

That is what I did. I even majored in government. I was (to his amusement) the only one of the government majors to head off to divinity school.

At Chicago Theological Seminary and the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, then the Federated Theological Faculties, I encountered an amazing group of distinguished scholars, including Joe Sittler, Bernard Loomer, Bernard Meland, J. S. Whale (a visiting professor in theology, from Britain), J. Coert Rylaarsdam, Robert Grant, Marcus Barth, Gibson Winter, Seward Hiltner, Granger Westberg, Mircea Eliade, Nathan Scott and James Nichols. I was so unsophisticated that I had no idea how privileged I was to learn from them.

This was an era before people became interested in spirituality. “Spiritual formation” was something I had neither heard nor thought about. The student body was diverse and dispersed. Students were there for different reasons, and we hardly knew one another. Most of us still don’t, for that matter; there are no class reunions.

But once a week there was a service in the chapel. Not everyone attended. I did. And so through the weeks I saw one famous scholar after another read scripture and

preach a sermon. I don't remember a thing about the content of those sermons. But the experience of sitting in worship as those venerable scholars became preachers, servants and stewards of the Word was life-changing for me. I thank God for every one of them.