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I'm the Teacher, You're the Student—A Tract for the Times

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Professor of U.S. History at Emory University in Atlanta, Allitt also serves as director of Emory's Center for Teaching and Curriculum. While in most institutions a title like that would probably indicate that the holder is a bureaucrat rather than a teacher, Allitt's passion for teaching is grounded in a wealth of experience and a treasury of insight.

Allitt's field at Emory is American history, a fact made all the more interesting when Allitt reveals that he is a native of Great Britain and a graduate of Oxford University—who first came to the United States in order to do graduate work. He came to love America—warts and all—and has become a recognized specialist in American history, including the nation's religious history.

The book begins with a celebration of the professorial role. “It's a great life being a college professor, and the best part of the job is the teaching. I've been teaching history to undergraduates for more than twenty years and have always loved it.”

A widely published author, Allitt has written a small shelf of books covering issues in American history and Catholic intellectual life. This last interest may explain the heavily Augustinian character of Allitt's philosophy of teaching. As the greatest theologian of the early church recognized, teaching requires a relationship of love between the student and the teacher, and between the teacher and the subjects taught. Professor Allitt demonstrates a profound embrace of both loves—but not according to the dictates of modern emotivism.

In our therapeutic age, conditioned by the culture of artificial sentimentality, a professor's love for students will often be demonstrated in an indulgent, student-centered “learning experience.” Allitt seems to believe that his profession requires a very different approach.

Just take the title of the book—I'm the Teacher, You're the Student. As Allitt explains, “There are all kinds of implications. First, as the teacher, I know more about the subject than students do, which is why they attend the class in the first place. They want to learn things they do not yet know. As their teacher, I have power over them because part of my job is to evaluate their work and give them grades. Second, some students are more talented than others, and some are more hard-working than others, which means that their achievements—and their grades—will differ. Third, despite the steady temptation to make friends with the students, I have to resist it lest it compromise my judgment and impartiality.”

Those bracing words represent a concise refutation of the psychobabble and anti-authoritarian approaches that have so corrupted most college and university campuses. Most students—and their parents—think of themselves as consumers who

are buying a product from the university. This product is not actually an education—most students would be hard pressed to define what such an education would require—but a credential. Beyond that precious credential, which is assumed to provide a ticket to upward mobility and lifetime income, this generation is also looking for an experience that will make them feel better about themselves and provide adequate fun and entertainment along the way.

At least since the 1960s, most college administrators have lived in fear of the student body. When the children of the sixties became the faculty of the nineties, the radicals of that generation became the tenured professors of today. Because of this, today's professors think that the university is there to provide them with an adequate political platform, while the students believe that the university should be a carnival of amusements, leavened with indulgence.

Allitt simply believes that the professor is present in the classroom primarily to teach. Relationships between professors and students must be professional. As Allitt explains, "Professors and students must not be friends (friends don't give each other grades that have a vital effect on their futures)." He allows that professors should be friendly toward students, "but there must be no special friendship beyond a generalized affability."

I'm the Teacher, You're the Student presents a series of reflective chapters tracking the classroom experience of just one course over a single semester. Allitt takes his readers through the process of arranging the class syllabus, and then walks us through the classroom experience over the academic term, dropping insights and anecdotes that are not to be missed.

Clearly, Allitt does not aim to indulge his students. He is a hard taskmaster, even as he pours his heart and mind into lectures that include everything from film and music to his scholarly insights into the course of American history and the development of America as a modern world power.

"One of the sorrows of being a college teacher is that there is an inverse correlation between your willingness to see or talk to students and the actual time you spend with them," Allitt notes. "The good ones, the ones who do their work well, try hard, understand the readings, and write stimulating papers, would be a pleasure to entertain." Nevertheless, the very fact that they are working hard means that they are less likely to demand the professor's time. Instead, Allitt reveals that a professor would quickly be consumed by student requests for special allowances, personal exceptions, and the like.

His classroom is an arena for the learning experience, not an accidental place where people have gathered for an hour of "sharing." His syllabus minces no words: "No eating, drinking, or wearing hats in class." "The baseball caps have always been an affliction," Allitt laments. "It was bad enough when they were worn with the bill facing forward. . . . Then came the trend, starting around 1994, to wear the hats backward, with the bill sticking out behind and the adjustable plastic tabs defining a semicircle of forehead. The reversed student hat makes a statement about its wearer, something like, 'I am dull!'"

Allitt doesn't care for cell phones, either. "These days I begin every class with a general declaration: 'Cell phones and beepers off? Then we can begin!'"

Allitt's summaries of his lectures make for fascinating reading in themselves. He immerses his students in the reading of primary sources, eschewing the use of a textbook.

Why does Allitt avoid the use of a survey textbook? As he explains, "These days, college-level textbooks on recent American history are unremittingly gloomy and doomy. They hammer away at examples of injustice, prejudice, discrimination, and repression, as if designed to induce in readers a sense of shame and regret. From them you could easily get the impression that no one in America had ever had any enjoyment, any justified sense of purpose, or any pride in their nation, their lives, and their accomplishments." Allitt's honest enthusiasm about America—balanced with his critical observations about America's various successes and failures—is a much-needed corrective to the cynicism so often found among American academics.

He exults in confronting his students with the politically incorrect reality of Theodore Roosevelt. "Nearly all his attitudes are wrong by our standards; he's virtually the personification of all that is not politically correct. He's lovable and admirable anyway, or at least it's possible to imagine why he was lovable and admirable to many members of his generation. The students and I have the charge, therefore, to go over passages of the book together and unravel his attitudes, why he holds them, how he applies them, and why it should be that we now think so differently."

From the same era, Allitt also requires his students to read from the autobiography of Emma Goldman, the infamous anarchist. In Allitt's presentation, Goldman appears as "a lovable crackpot." Nevertheless, this professor is not afraid to make moral judgments.

Today's generation of college students has been raised on electronic entertainments, video games, and they have been coddled by both parents and the schools they have attended. Many of them simply do not read, and do not know how to read.

"Many professors blame the schools for the fact that students are not well read by the time they get to college," Allitt acknowledges. "The schools certainly haven't done a good job of teaching them to write, but surely we should blame the students' families for the great reading deficit. Or maybe blame is the wrong way of thinking about it. I wish students would read more books. It would help them in finding their way around in the world, give them an immense fund of moral education, and captivate their imaginations. If they have not read many books, it is probably because their parents did not read many either, making the idea of reading as an activity altogether distant."

Students will not survive Allitt's course without learning to read or without learning how to read with comprehension and the ability to engage the material.

Yet, Allitt's instructional method is not limited to the reading of texts. He possesses a master teacher's ability to transform a question into an opportunity for almost magical perception. What would it have been like to have lived in America when it was an overwhelmingly agrarian culture? Allitt knows what he is up against: "Not one of the forty or so in this class grew up in a farm (I asked them last time), and not one of them has ever milked a cow, plowed a field, driven a tractor, scanned the sky anxiously in search of much-needed rain, or cursed a hailstorm for beating down the crops. Yet to understand American history you have to understand farming, without which the society would neither have come into existence nor continued to exist."

Allitt is speaking to a privileged group of young people, and he knows it. Generally speaking, they have come from families of wealth and they have already experienced much of what money and social status can provide. "Many of them are good company," Allitt concedes, "and being in class usually puts them on their best behavior. They are young, healthy, and (for the most part) sensible. They are old enough that they can do most of the things involved in living independent lives; they don't have to be mothered."

At some point, readers of Allitt's book are likely to question that last assumption. *I'm the Teacher, You're the Student* is filled with anecdotes about today's students, young people who are certain that their love lives, computer breakdowns, and various sniffles require reshuffling the syllabus and the entire academic experience. Anyone who has had even the slightest experience of teaching in America's college and university classrooms will immediately identify with the student types and personal examples that pepper Allitt's narrative.

This author also reveals his own sensibilities. He pushes his students hard, but he cannot help liking them. Beyond this, he seems to care about them to such a degree that he actually measures his own effectiveness by whether or not his students are learning the material. When he has to deal with their personal problems—always at arm's length—he does so with a mixture of firmness and understanding. He resists indulgence, but he demonstrates care and shows respect.

As the semester ends, Allitt realizes that he is a better teacher for having had the experience of nurturing this class along to a knowledge of American history and its meaning. "As I predicted, the students became far more attractive with the passage of time, far more varied, and far more obvious in their vulnerability. Some learned a lot, some picked up a handful of insights and ideas, a few improved their writing, and nearly all learned (more or less willingly) a cluster of facts." The professor laments the end of the semester, and readers of his book will share his sense of loss.

As Allitt concedes, "As always, I feel sad to have reached the end of the semester, sad to think that this wonderful class, with all of its quirks, delights, and oddities, will never meet again."

America's colleges and universities have been largely transformed into palaces of political correctness and vocational schools for technocrats. Critics have no shortage of material for denunciation, diagnosis, and warning. Nevertheless, all those who prize the task of teaching and the experience of learning will be encouraged by the reminder that, so long as professors like Patrick Allitt are in the classroom, there is reason for hope.

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