

A teacher with a difference

(Based on ideas of Joseph Epstein, and recorded in affectionate memory of a great teacher and remarkable Jesuit, Fr. Antonio Sabino, S.J. (1919-1997)-(Courtesy) JIVAN, Mumbai, April, 1997).

TEACHING is a performing art, and great teachers, like great actors can only be described, not explained.

This may seem an astonishing description, because courses and curricula have led us to think differently. We are eager to pick up the tricks of the trade, impressive skills and infallible techniques. We want to be updated with information and audiovisual media, confident that thus we will dominate the classroom.

Not so. Subjects to a teacher are as role to an actor. Skills and techniques are the costumes he wears, all of them important-but none of them vital. What is vital is the gift of the imagination, and the ability to communicate it.

When one watches a gifted performance on stage, one forgets time, space, the crowded hall, the discomfort of sitting. One identifies completely with the actor. So too, when you listen to a great teacher you allow yourself to be challenged by him. Provoked. Stimulated. Persuaded. Aroused. Reasoned with. Soothed.

And you become intensely aware. Imagination takes over, and learning begins. That is what all great teaching is about. But it is more than imagination. Imagination captures the attention, but integrity sustains the commitment. What is this integrity, this 'wholeness' which the teacher brings?

In the ancient world teachers were respected and honoured. Brahmins and mandarins set the advice of philosophers. Not so anymore.

Today learning is not the exclusive domain of any one class. Knowledge is democratic, and can be picked up and absorbed from books and newspapers, correspondence courses, television and computers. And all learning, it seems, has a price tag. So who needs teachers anymore? Why pay them any longer?

A teacher does not manufacture products or trade in them. A teacher's task is to shape ideas.

Ideas, thoughts, values, beliefs-these are the legacies of mankind. Products pay for themselves, but ideas are noncommercial. And yet, we need them. "Without a vision, the nation perishes". We need all those men and women whose activity is basically non-commercial and intangible. We need artists, poets, writers, actors...teachers. Men and women who give us new visions,

who transmit the traditions of the past into the currents of the present, who persuade us when we are bored, reason with us when we are irrational.

Computers and books have their place, no doubt. Still, there is no substitute for contact with a great mind and noble heart.

The test of effective teaching is realized in the heart of the student-through the heart of the teacher. Like few other human activities, it brings home the feeling that one is doing something precious, very essential. For what is more vital than this continuing conversation about the things which have made one what one is?

For that is what a good teacher does he discovers what the important works and the far-reaching questions are, and then helps students to engage with them, and by doing so, develop their own powers.

But great teachers go one step further. The student perceives here an extraordinarily intimate relationship between the teacher and his subject, as if to say that his sense of his subject is indistinguishable from his sense of life. Indeed, how much of a person's meaning is represented and embodied in his teaching?

Such questions only arise with great teachers, whose lives are symbols of integrity, and seamless wholeness between living and thinking, doing and teaching.

Are good teachers also popular?

A difficult and misleading question. Student evaluations must be accepted warily. Too often students judge a teacher solely by his likeableness. But being likeable and being effective are two completely different things.

Does a student really know which lessons stay after all the years? Does even a teacher? A teacher, who seemed dull when one was taking his courses, can later seem to be decisive to one's development. Another, who kept one laughing, and led one to believe that one was mastering one's subject, can later on seem quite negligible. It is not always easy to know. The influence that passes from teacher to student is probable best recollected and understood in tranquility-that is to say, only in years to come.