

# Hey, I'm No Superman

## The Teacher as Hero

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FOR YEARS DURING STRESSFUL TIMES I have turned with thought and ear to Sydney Carter's hymn-like song, "Julian of Norwich" (1981). The lyric derives from the words of Julian of Norwich, a 14<sup>th</sup> century anchoress and mystic. I have always taken great comfort from her counsel:

All shall be well I'm telling you  
Let the winter come and go  
All shall be well again, I know.

I recall once singing that song to a student who was about to undergo a delicate brain surgery that would attempt to control his severe epilepsy. More recently, I sent the song to my own child who was suffering a broken heart. In both cases, I hoped that the words served some comfort. We all need a little comfort sometimes.

A story was told: The wise King Solomon owned a ring on which he had engraved the words "This too shall pass." Whenever events turned against him and he suffered in defeat and depression, he would look at the ring and read, "This too shall pass," and he was comforted. And when fortune appeared favorable to he and his kingdom, then also would he look at the ring: "This too shall pass," and he was comforted. Solomon's ring reminded him of the ephemeral and temporary nature of life. He was wise to attend to the ring because from it he would know to ever be prepared for a turn of events. He was always expectantly ready, though he must not have been always pleased as things unfolded.

And again: In *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir says, "The tears of the world are a constant quantity." When one stops her weeping, then somewhere another begins to cry. Vladimir suggests that the level of sorrow neither increases nor decreases—though it may variously occupy different sites, the degree of sorrow in the world stays constant. And I understand in Vladimir's words an expression of Solomonic wisdom—if the tears of the world are a constant quantity, then this difficulty for me, too, shall pass. I am comforted.

I think that it requires a great deal of courage to take these daily stances in the world. No one would wish the end of their happiness, nor can one easily foresee a cessation to their sorrow. A certain stoicism is required in either situation. Seneca (2004) writes, "It is in times of security that the spirit should be preparing itself to deal with difficult times; while fortune is bestowing favours on it then is the time for it to be strengthened against her rebuffs" (p. 67). I think rarely—and perhaps, least of all today—has the teacher, a community to which I proudly belong, time for respite or security. We teachers are and have been for some time sorely beset. Nevertheless, we keep on keeping on. We can be heroes.

In her functioning the teacher assumes this stoic stance daily. Standing before her classes, she appears as the person who knows, but if she is very wise, then she knows that she doesn't know for certain. Her charge is to educate, but what that means is too often defined by others who do not in fact know what she does know and who without cause have little confidence in her capacity to fulfill her task. Indeed, she knows that though she teaches, some of her students still might not learn through absolutely no fault of her own and sometimes not even of theirs. She is constrained to be silent though she must speak. And at the end of the day she returns home wondering what today had transpired, what had she done, what value had she added. She reads in the newspapers or hears on the televisions and radios that the problem with America lies in her incompetence. She wonders will this sorrow too pass, but the news continues to remain negative. And though polls report that most parents love their local school, the same polls report that few approve of the school system as a whole (<http://pdkintl.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/5/files/2012-Gallup-poll-full-report.pdf>). Books attacking the public schools, teachers and their unions pop up overnight like poisonous mushrooms, and the government initiatives, policies and programs offer little relief and yet more critique. Public school compete with unsuccessful charter schools for the ever-declining funds that state governments have allocated for public education, thus condemning those very schools and the teachers who work in them to inadequate resources and insufficient recompense for the difficult job they have undertaken. Too many who occupy the schools walk about with their spiritual and intellectual lives at risk. Fifty percent of teachers quit the field after five years, many of them from having been too badly beaten (Labaree, 2010). It is difficult to believe that all shall be well again or that this too shall pass.

There are almost 3.5 million public school teachers in the United States; there are perhaps another 60,000-70,000 more teachers in private and independent schools and almost 1.7 million teachers in higher education. And almost daily I hear someone who is not engaged in the schools or education decry the incompetence of so many of these teachers. Since at least 1983 and *A Nation at Risk*, teachers have been the object of the vitriol of the politicians and businessmen in the United States. Everyone who has no knowledge of education and teaching but who assigns a great political (or economic) interest to it has weighed in on the poor quality of the whole system, commenting particularly and viciously on the ineffectiveness, nay, the incompetence of the teachers. And too many of those teachers skulk about almost ashamed that of what they are accused is true. And *that* is a terrible shame. As the school doors open I see too many teachers steal through them shamefacedly; they have been labeled the enemy and their efforts denigrated and condemned. Teachers truly are at risk. And the accusation? It is *they* who have caused the imperial decline in the United States; it is *they* who produced the economic downturn, and *they* who have caused and ill-fought two wars. The decline of the Cities, the return of segregated education, the growing gap between rich and poor is lain at the feet of the incompetent teachers. The leash tightens. It is all a terrible, malodorous lie. Shall all be well again?

Rules and regulations and core standards proliferate and are handed down to teachers on

an almost daily basis. They adhere to the regulations in anticipation and desperation: Common Core Standards, standardized testing, NCATE, and now EdTPa. There is little opportunity to learn, we are too busy teaching what they say we must teach, administering too many tests that they require. Czeslaw Milosz (1981) writes: “A man may persuade himself, by the most logical reasoning, that he will greatly benefit his health by swallowing live frogs; and, thus rationally convinced, he may swallow a first frog, then the second; but at the third his stomach will revolt” (p. xiii). Teachers give up, give in, and many get out and stay out. I am afraid they have eaten too many live frogs. Theirs is made an impossible task: to teach what will not be learned and to advocate for what should not or cannot be learned.

Teachers are aware that knowledge is not the product we offer in the classroom but the ability acquired there to further pursue learning. Teachers understand that knowledge is not a product to be gained but a process in which to be engaged. Study is a stance we assume in the world. In his essay “Walking,” Thoreau (2001) distinguishes between knowledge and what he refers to as Sympathy with Intelligence. He writes, “I do not know that this higher knowledge amounts to anything more definite than a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before,—a discovery that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy” (p. 250). As Thoreau suggested, study is a way of being—it is an ethics. When we learn we acknowledge in public our sense of wonder and awe. Wonder is a radical amazement; wonder is a state of maladjustment to words and notions, the recognition of their fluidity. Wonder arises in the awareness of the world’s glory that always exceeds our comprehension and our grasp.

We respond to our wonder with awe. To experience awe is to acknowledge that there is meaning in the smallest particle if only we could understand. In an article concerning the current state of knowledge in physics, Steven Weinberg (2013) acknowledges, “The history of elementary particle physics has followed a very different course from that of cosmology. Rather than being starved for data fifty years ago, we were deluged by data we could not understand” (p. 87). Despite the great advances in our knowledge that has occurred, Weinberg (2013) writes “Physical science has historically progressed not only by finding precise explanations of natural phenomena, but also by discovering what sorts of things *can* be precisely explained. These may be fewer than we had thought” (p. 88). In the tradition of study we acknowledge how little we know. We stand in awe at the complexities of our lives that we only realize in part. Study offers us moments of insight and chances for direction. Study is the awareness that we live amidst daily miracles, and that there is more to the world than we will ever know. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1959) writes that “The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe” (p. 52). Study is an expression of awe. When we study we take a stance in awe and humility, and we actively acknowledge “our lives take place under horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life, or even the life of a generation, a nation, or an era.” (p. 52) Study emanates from the silence of awe and wonder. If contemporary chaos theory argues that there is order in the universe, but that it is only recognizable in time, then engagement in study acknowledges our patience and our hope. Knowledge, Heschel (1959) teaches, is fostered by curiosity (p. 52). Study might set standards to which we aspire but never reach. It is not for lack of trying that the standards cannot be achieved; it is that the standards always elude us. They are a consummation devoutly to be sought for but never achieved. Not a school district in the United States exists that does not contain in its mission statement the intent to create life-long learners, but every school-year learning ends with the tests they administer. How many frogs can one teacher eat?

I have learned to accept that education in our schools today has little to do with learning, a process that I believe ought to be continual and difficult and that could be boundless, but that has today become only that activity with exactly focused behavioral objectives and measured, standardized achievement that set firmly bounded and clearly defined ends. In schools today, the answer must be readily available, repeatable and testable. Students are taught to ask, “What did I get?” and never to wonder, “What did I give? There are finite classes of carefully scripted materials that are circumscribed by exact beginning and ending dates; at the former one is presented with a syllabus and at the latter assigned a grade. The teacher is required to prepare every class so that it arrives at a definite conclusion that will lead directly to the next-day’s lesson and that follows immediately from that of the previous one. “What does education do but cut a meandering brook into a straight-cut ditch!” Thoreau (1962, 83) complains. And so at the semester’s end another check mark may be made to the credit audit report and another step towards graduation marked completed. The teacher files away her syllabus and class notes, and then it is on to the next course. I have been told *ad nauseam* that my role as teacher will be assessed by the value that is added to the student as a result of the experience of my class, but I don’t know how to establish the character of that value by which I will be adjudged except by the standardized texts by which I refuse to be bounded and in which I can not believe. My stomach turns at the third frog.

There is something sterile about education today in this age of accountability and something quite deadening to the lives of the teachers who choose to enter the classroom that are governed by these measures. These teachers are constrained, however, to attend to the dictates and initiatives of those in power in order to maintain their position in what ought to be an honorable profession but has become a mere rote service-for-hire. Too often the teacher rationally eats the first and even the second frog. In few classrooms are teachers responsible for teaching that learning has no end, or that learning ought to engage students in the mire and the muck of life rather than to keep them secluded from it. I suspect that a better awareness of this adventure might prepare students for the lives they will inevitably live in the world. Our tests and accountability assessments falsify the complexity of the world *and* the world of learning, and thereby, they avoid the difficult task of education. Tests and common core standards have become the standardized answer, but I wonder to what question they are a response. Too often I think we teach rather to listen without thought and to say by rote. I think that in the schools we have ceased standing in awe of the world that surrounds us. I think rather, that the world too often terrifies us, and our standards and certainties assuage our fear. Nevertheless, these answers have become precarious constraints. Isaiah Berlin (2000) warns, “To force people into the neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes is almost always the road to inhumanity. We can only do what we can: but that we must do, against difficulties” (p. 16). The stomach of the wise and heroic teacher turns as she attempts to swallow the third frog . . . she refuses.

### **Not a Digression**

I have been watching reruns of *Scrubs*, a television situation comedy that ran from 2001 through 2010. In the opening sequence the main characters serially pass to each other an X-ray negative that intern J.D eventually hangs on a backlight box and that names the show’s title. In the background the opening jingle declares, “I can’t do this all on my own. No, I’m no superman,”

and refers clearly not only to the series of doctors who have passed along the X-ray photograph, but also to the nature of the entire medical profession. It is an interesting admission that suggests that despite the comedic aspects of the show, all will not be well enough. Indeed, in Season Four, Resident Director Dr. Perry Cox, standing before a new contingent of interns, offers what was promoted as a supportive pep talk. He speaks with enthusiasm and excitement, “Okay, here it is. Every one of you is going to kill a patient. At some point . . . you will screw up, they will die, and it will be burned into your consciousness forever.” Needless to say, he terrifies the neophytes! I teach that episode to first year students in the teacher education program at the university who arrive to class with some vague, romantic motive for becoming a teacher, and who hold some idealized image of the work teaching entails. *Their teacher is the superman* and I work to disabuse them of this myth and provide them with a method to hold off their first kill. Dr. Cox continues, “The harder you study the longer you may be able to hold off that first kill.” It is little comfort but it offers some relief and motive.

Our educational standards today mask the risks and difficulties that are intrinsic to the position of teacher. Our objective in education has become not to learn, a pursuit that demands the commission of error after error, but to be right, a condition that assumes no mistake! As Thoreau earlier suggested, the acceptance of uncertainty is the hallmark of intelligence, and it ought to be the teacher’s work to prepare students to be at ease with ambiguity. In Philip Roth’s (1997) *American Pastoral* the character Zuckerman says,

The fact remains that getting people right is not what living is all about anyway. It’s getting them wrong that is living, getting them wrong and wrong and wrong and then, on careful reconsideration, getting them wrong again. That’s how we know we’re alive: we’re wrong (p. 35).

Being wrong is the impetus to move forward. But in schools we harshly penalize for erroneous responses! Dewey somewhere says that an experiment whose results turn out as expected has been a badly designed experiment: there is nothing to think about if everything worked as planned. There is nothing to think about in the absolute achievement of success except the past.

In education we have been commanded to be right, but I do not think that that is how learning occurs. Learning requires problems, even insolvable ones, as Weinberg has suggested is the lesson of physics. We teachers? Well we’re *no* supermen, either. Everyone of us is going to kill a patient. When Ishmael heads out to sea it is because he is a seeker, and it is in the life at sea that he searches for “the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all” (p. 3). Ungraspable! Thoreau (1988) picks up a stoppered bottle yet half full with red ale that had washed up on the shore of Cape Cod, and lifting it, as did Hamlet contemplating Yorick’s skull, Thoreau says,

[A]s I poured it slowly onto the sand, it seemed to me that man himself was like a half-emptied bottle of pale ale, which Time had drunk so far, yet stoppered tight for a while, and drifting about in the ocean of circumstances; but destined ere long to mingle with the surrounding waves, or be spilled amid these sands of the distant shore (p. 92).

In Thoreau’s words there is only the clear and singular sound of life’s tragic view that today’s classroom obscures behind a plethora of answers, numbers and instruments of measurement.

I think that the sterility of contemporary classrooms organized by strict objectives and methods of assessment avoids the messiness of the world and will not prepare students for the challenging and often difficult business of learning and teaching: I am a teacher and, at present, a teacher of teachers. Once (if not always) I was a high school English teacher. Doubt and ambiguity were my *métier*; these states were my entrance into thought and my strength in method, and I think it served our students well. But today, we hide our fears of chaos and disorder—of the certainty of uncertainty—behind all of the numbers and common core standards and instruments of assessments we employ to protect us from the void. We have stopped teaching for the ease of management and the safety and comfort of certainty.

What is't I do, in fact? This is not a casual question, for almost everyday for the past forty-five years I have walked into the classroom as a teacher. What did I do? What should I have done? Despite the implication of the characterizations in the recent film, I am no superman, but in the eyes of society I have become in some odd way rendered superhumanly responsible for the current and future state of the whole country, at least. I have learned that this is my state because the description and directive appears daily in the newspapers. They—the politicians and pundits—say that my effort should result in a recovered world, a redeemed world. They say, my work should be such as to raise the dead. Alas, I recognize I am more like *Bartleby*—though standing on the green grass, I am yet encased in *The Tombs*—I know where I am.

What is to be done? What is't I do? I study and I teach, I teach and I study, and for my health, I forgo eating live frogs. The Rabbis wonder when will the Messiah come? *That* the Messiah will come never seems to them in doubt, but in the meantime, they acknowledge, we must yet continue to act. What should be the work done while waiting. What should be that work we do while we await the Messiah's arrival? In their discussion in *Sanhedrin*, the Rabbis turn to Scriptures to identify the time of the Messiah's arrival. Rab asserts that, "The son of David [the Messiah] will not come until the [Roman] power enfolds Israel for nine months." To arrive at this conclusion, Rab interprets a line from the prophet *Micah*: V:2: "God will deliver [Israel] to its enemies until the time that a woman in childbirth gives birth; then the rest of his brothers will return with the children of Israel." The statement means that the Messiah will come only after the Roman power has subjugated Israel completely—that is, in all of those lands to which the people of Israel are exiled—for as long as a woman is pregnant—nine months. Ulla responds, and Rabba agrees, "Let [the Messiah] come but let me not see him." Abaye wonders aloud, what might be Rabba's reason for not wishing to see the coming of the Messiah. Could it be, Abaye wonders, that Rabba does not wish to see the birth pangs—the difficulties and pains that precede the birth of a new era? And in the back of the room a timid student, one of Rabbi Eleazar's disciples asks, "What must a man do to be spared the pangs [which precede the coming] of the Messiah?" Isn't there anything one can do to avoid the difficulties of this sight? And Eleazar, his teacher, answers, "Let him engage in study and benevolence."

It is a curious answer. But I think it addresses the crisis in education which we daily confront. We teachers must wait for no deliverer, though there are no ends to the claims of false Messiahs: Ralph Tyler, Madelyn Hunter, E. D. Hirsch, Arne Duncan, Diane Ravitch, William Bennett, Joel Klein, George W. Bush, Michael Bloomberg. Things *are* breaking up out there, Reb Dylan tells us. Perhaps they always have been: Parmenides seemed to think so. Our buildings are falling down and crumbling in decay. Soldiers besiege us. We teachers must await no savior. In our work, teachers must ourselves become our succor. For it seems to me that the rabbis have taught us what we must do while waiting; a waiting which itself would create conditions for the Messiah. We teachers must be ourselves our saviors. We must *study* and

perform acts of *benevolence*. We must teach study and not always be studied. And this study is not a quietistic retreat into the ivory tower of the academy; rather, it is a study that is linked to acts of benevolence. Interestingly enough, Cox's lecture to the new interns ends in a similar directive: "The harder you study the longer will hold off your first kill." Study and benevolence. I'm no superman!

Let me approach my thoughts concerning the character and work of the teacher by another route. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1954), Vladimir and Estragon hear Pozzo's cries for help and wonder what those cries oblige them to do. Vladimir says to Estragon, "To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us!" (p. 51) I take some (but not all) exception to Vladimir's description of humanity as an unwholesome litter destined for base purpose. But hearing Pozzo's entreaties, Vladimir acknowledges to Estragon their obligations to the cries of distress that have been addressed, albeit, to all, but which they alone are present to hear: we should act, he urges Estragon. Of course, Vladimir and Estragon were not waiting for Pozzo; they were waiting for Godot (ah!), but Pozzo at this moment is representative of all humanity in need, and it is to Vladimir and Estragon that his cries are made and it is them that his cries oblige. Though Vladimir and Estragon have *not* set as their purpose to be responsible, circumstances have become such that they have the opportunity to act responsibly. They can do something!<sup>1</sup>

Every time a teacher walks into the classroom she hears those cries for help ringing in her ears, even in the deadening silence of too many classrooms. But teachers *do* do something, and though they are far from perfect, they study harder to hopefully put off that first kill. It is *this* courage that makes teachers not supermen but heroes.

What is't we do? In this era of standardized high-stakes tests and constant measurement, this question persists: How to hear the cries addressed to all mankind and to know how to act when we hear them! Indeed, amidst the maddening crowd how may we hear our own cries? What is it that we would hear? Perhaps what we might hear in our classrooms is Pozzo's cries as he lies helplessly on the ground: "Help me rise!" It is very difficult work despite the ideology that says that teaching is easy. As David Labaree (2010) says, "In many ways, teaching is the most difficult of professions" (p. 11). To begin with, Labaree suggests, teachers depend on students for their success and there is only a minimum of control a teacher has over any one student's learning engagement. Secondly, students are mostly conscripts in the classroom: many are in school not because they want to learn or even understand how learning might be defined, but because by law, they must attend. Third, says Labaree, teachers need to carry out their practices under conditions of high uncertainty—what exactly is a teacher responsible for doing? Too, there exist these entities referred to as best practices, but that process assumes, I think, the presence of a patient etherized upon a table, a certain knowledge that the gall bladder must be removed, and a single best method to get it done. But I do not think that teaching works that way—at the least because in the classrooms it is because the patient is awake, often resistant, and expected to participate *during* the process in some conscious relationship with the teacher. It is an unlikely combination even on a good day and there are thirty students sitting before the teacher and not merely a single accommodating and unconscious patient. Dr. Cox says to the interns, "I know you're scared . . . But here's the dirty little secret: fear is good. It keeps you from becoming a crappy doctor. But you can't let [the fear] paralyze you!" To avoid hearing our fears or Pozzo's cries, many of us are instructed to turn up the music or don noise-cancellation

earphones; we accede to the mandates handed down from administrative agencies who remain sensitive to the politicians whose agenda is reelection and not education. We are offered for consumption another live frog. Some of us even swallow it.

I think that the strict standards and organized procedures that now govern our classrooms render silent and invisible the complexity of experience with which teachers daily must contend and for which they must prepare students. Too often this adherence to the prevailing *zeitgeist* keeps teachers from the essential work they must do; they stagnate, grow first uneasy, then frustrated and despondent. Soon, they leave the profession. There is nothing to do and nothing to be done. Czeslaw Milosz (2002) warns, “Because he who does not constantly overcome himself—i.e. does not learn and does not act—disintegrates within . . .” (p. 273). But today there is little opportunity for the teacher to grow in the restrictive and constricting environment of public education. It is no wonder that the teacher leaves school exhausted at the end of each day. It is not just with standards and mandated curricula and administrators and students with whom a teacher must grapple—it is with herself she must struggle. Milosz argues that the artist and the revolutionary are alike—no one puts words on paper or paints on canvas doubting what they do or without acting according to their beliefs. Few consider teachers as anything but technocrats and poorly prepared lackeys. But it might be that teachers could be known as artists and revolutionaries, to be a teacher means to possess beliefs on which to act and to have the courage to act upon those beliefs. To take such a stance today and always enacts a quiet and mostly invisible heroism that seems to go against the very nature of the American psyche. Perhaps though not supermen, teachers might begin to think of themselves as revolutionaries and artists... heroes.

Sometimes—alas, rarely—in the texts I study there appear exemplary models of such teachers. These teacher-heroes know either from the outset that, despite the public rhetoric, eating the first frog will not be good for her health and she refuses to swallow it even if others reluctantly accept whatever is placed on the plate. Or there are those teachers whose stomach turn at the third frog and cannot swallow it. These heroes suffer the insecurities of their own private doubts about what meaning their work actually enjoys; these heroes suffer existential dread in their role as the one who knows even when their knowledge denies them this comfort; and they suffer the edicts and forced compromises that emanate from what Milosz (1981) refers to as The Center; though these teachers recognize these directives as antithetical to the work they know they must do. Every day they stand before their students vulnerable but responsible, and even sometimes achieve a success of which they might remain unaware and for which they certainly receive little acknowledgement. And sometimes all of their effort realizes little success. They are heroes.

One such exemplar is Murray Ringold in Philip Roth's (1988) novel *I Married A Communist*. Though the titular hero of the book is Ira Ringold, the actual communist, it is Ira's brother, Murray, Nathan Zuckerman's high school English teacher, whose conversations with Zuckerman over six long summer evenings comprise the narrative substance of the book, who seems to me to be the actual hero of the book. Murray's efforts as a teacher address directly Vladimir's question—what should we do?—even as it exemplifies the Rabbi's urgings that what we must do while waiting for whomever it is we are to wait is to study and do acts of benevolence. The novel's narrative serves as the teacher's last lesson. As Murray's first lessons prepared Zuckerman for his life as a writer, Murray's last lesson as teacher will cast shadow over Zuckerman's engagements in life.



The Zuckerman texts in Philip Roth's corpus—narratives that chronicle and explain (in part) Zuckerman's withdrawal from an active to a hermetic life—offer evidence of the success *and* the failure of Murray's teaching. In contrast to the reclusive Zuckerman, Murray Ringold had remained engaged with and committed to his life in the school despite the public disdain he endured *as* a teacher, considered then a woman's profession, and the political difficulties he suffered as a teacher for his work with the union in its struggles to improve the status of the teaching profession. Murray's union activities were intended to combat “the personal indignity that you had to undergo as a teacher . . . [to be] treated like children” (p. 5) and had identified him with the Communist left (to which he did not, in fact, belong) but which association led eventually to his dismissal during the worst days of the McCarthy era persecutions. To support his family Murray sold vacuum cleaners door-to-door. Six years of court struggle earned him back the teaching position that he did not again leave until his late retirement. And despite the difficulty of the work intrinsic to the teaching profession, Murray Ringold expressed no doubt concerning the social and personal significance of his position as teacher and learner.

Murray's ethical and intellectual commitment to the profession came, however, at great personal cost and professional difficulty. After a court order demanding his reinstatement, Murray spent the rest of his career in the Newark city public school system. Even as the social conditions in the city deteriorated, Murray refused to abandon either his school or riot-torn Newark despite the urgings of his colleagues who had long-migrated to the schools in the mostly white, middle-class suburbs. Twice mugged, Murray refused to flee what he understood as his moral responsibility. Ultimately, Doris, his wife, was murdered in the streets on her walk home from work when a mugger demanded her handbag that had no money in it. Murray summarized his life to Nathan: I was, he says, “[h]ad by myself, in case you're wondering. Myself with all my principles. I can't betray my brother. I can't betray my teaching, I can't betray the disadvantaged of Newark. Doris paid the price of my civic virtue” (1998, 317). Having lost all of his illusions, all that endured was the *myth* of his own goodness, and though that goodness was admirable, he had come to accept that whatever might have been his intentions—his goodness—the myth of his goodness smashed upon the reality of the world. This acknowledgement exists as part of the teacher's last lesson: I can't do this all on my own. No, I'm no superman. Unlike Zuckerman, who admitted that in his life “I had chucked everything with which I no longer wish to contend, everything but what was need to live on and to work with” (p. 321), Murray remained committed to his ethics despite his inability to effect much by them. “I spend the last ten years there, until I retired. Couldn't teach anybody anything. Barely able to hold down the mayhem, let alone teach . . . But how could I run away? I was interested in respect being show for these kids” (p. 316-17). Unlike Zuckerman, Murray remains committed to an activist life despite the lack of evidence of any results. It is not that Zuckerman has not learned from his teacher; rather, it is that he rejected the lesson. When Murray asks Zuckerman “What are you warding off? What the hell happened?” Zuckerman responds, “I listened carefully to your story, that's what happened” (p. 320). As we teachers well know, lessons may even be learned and still not practiced, or they may be practiced but not in ways we originally intended.

Murray is the novel's hero because though he often stumbles, he always struggles to raise himself up, and in that struggle to help others accomplish the same. Zuckerman says,

All the while I was listening to Murray—and looking at the needle of a man he's become and thinking of his physique as the materialization of all that coherence of his, as the consequence of a lifelong indifference to everything other than liberty in its most austere

sense . . . thinking that Murray was an essentialist, that his character wasn't contingent, that wherever he'd found himself, even selling vacuum cleaners, he's managed to find his dignity . . . thinking that Murray (whom I didn't love or have to; with whom there was just the contract, teacher and student) was Ira (whom I did love) in a more mental, sensible, matter-of-fact version, Ira with a practical, clear, well-defined social goal, Ira without the heroically exaggerated ambitions, without that passionate overheated relationship to everything, Ira unblurred by impulse and the argument with everything . . . (p. 16).

Invisible as he has been rendered by the society and at times by even his students, Murray nevertheless challenged his students daily with the courage of the revolutionary, the confidence of the artist—he epitomizes the teacher as hero.

Murray Ringold had come home from service in World War II and *chosen* to become a high school English teacher. To Murray, teaching was more than important—teaching was essential. “If there's any chance for the improvement of life,” Murray explains to Zuckerman, in language that echoes the teachings of John Dewey and George Counts, “where's it going to begin if not in the school?” (p. 317). Forty-seven years after the adolescent Zuckerman had sat in Murray's classroom, Zuckerman again sits in Ringold's classroom in thrall at the mastery and wisdom of the teacher. Sitting on the porch of the cloistered home in Western Massachusetts to which Zuckerman has retreated from the life the teacher has refused to abandon, over six summer evenings Murray narrates to Zuckerman Ira Ringold's troubled life and Murray's engagement in it during a disturbing era in American history now referred to as the McCarthy Era. Murray even offers his student, Nathan Zuckerman, autobiographical insight on the trajectory of his own life: a fellowship application that had been rejected because of his association with the Ringold brothers, Murray and Ira. This understanding becomes part of the last lesson that Zuckerman acknowledges about our lives—there is so much about them we do not know!

Of course, it should not be too surprising to find out that your life story has included an event, something important, that you have known nothing about—your life story is in and of itself something that you know very little about (p. 15).

Perhaps few have the opportunity to understand their lives narratively and do not therefore examine it for effects and causes, tropes and themes, though this *might be* the work of our classrooms—but it is in the last lesson from his teacher that Zuckerman comes to some resigned understanding of his own life.

This process, I suppose, represents a classic example of *currere*, and perhaps that ought to be the subject of another essay. Nevertheless, Murray's narration is a passionate and riveting story; its themes serve for Zuckerman as his teacher's last lesson. In several months Murray at the age of ninety years old will have died. At this last meeting of teacher and student, Murray commands Zuckerman to do something with Ira's story. The novel *I Married a Communist* is the product of this last lesson, and it is the story of a hero though it is not Ira but Murray who achieves this eminence.

From the beginning Zuckerman understood in Murray's commitment a dedication to a moral code that his teaching epitomized.

You felt, in the sexual sense, the power of a male high school teacher like Murray Ringold—masculine authority uncorrected by piety—and you felt, *in the priestly sense*, (italics added) the vocation of a male high school teacher who wasn't lost in the amorphous American aspiration to make it big, who—unlike the school's women teachers—could have chosen to be almost anything else and chose instead, for his life work, to be ours. All he wanted all day long was to deal with young people he could influence, and his biggest kick in life he got from their response (p. 2).

*In the priestly sense*, the teacher supported and nurtured the spirit of his students, acted with responsibility and concern for what could only be described as their spiritual development. “I burned with zeal to establish the dignity of my profession . . . I was interested in respect being shown for these kids.” For Murray, teaching was an ethical, even a prophetic calling, and he had committed his life to the profession. “I was a professional schoolteacher, reading books, teaching Shakespeare, making you kids diagram sentences and memorize poetry and appreciate literature. I thought no other life worth living.” Zuckerman says, “Teaching was a passionate occupation for him, and he was an exciting guy” (p. 77). Like the priest, Murray had committed his life to the care of others and the betterment of society.

Ringold had been Zuckerman's first English teacher and noting Zuckerman's output, apparently one of the great influences on his life, though at the time this was not obvious to the young Zuckerman. “Not that the impression his bold classroom style left on my sense of freedom was apparent at the time: no kid thought that way about school or teachers or himself” (p. 2). As a teacher Murray provided his students with the model and the method for intellectual engagement, not simply by the content he taught but by the stance he assumed in the classroom. Zuckerman says,

Mr. Ringold brought with him into the classroom a charge of visceral spontaneity that was a revelation to tamed, respectablized kids who were yet to comprehend that obeying a teacher's rules of decorum had nothing to do with mental development . . . His special talent was for dramatizing inquiry, for casting a strong narrative spell even when he was being strictly analytic and scrutinizing aloud, in his clear-cut way, what we read and wrote (p. 2).

Zuckerman describes not merely this novel's method but that of all the Zuckerman books in the Roth corpus: analysis, intellectual scrutiny, and philosophical speculation concerning life's meaning: what is it all about, Alfie? Ringold's pedagogy was about method rather than content. “In human society,” Mr. Ringold taught us, “thinking's the greatest transgression of all. Cri-ti-cal think-ing,” Mr. Ringold said, using his knuckles to rap out each of the syllables on his desktop, “—there is the ultimate subversion” (p. 2). And Zuckerman adds,

I told Murray that hearing this early on from a manly guy like him—seeing it demonstrated by him—provided the most valuable clue to growing up that I had clutched at, albeit half comprehendingly, as a provincial, protected, high-minded high school kid yearning to be rational and of consequence and free (p. 2-3).

In this last lesson, in *I Married a Communist*, Zuckerman confesses that he had learned that lesson wisely and too well.

Almost one hundred years earlier, William James (1892/1961) expressed an idea similar to Murray's. James had written,

*To sustain a representation, to think*, is in short, the only moral act, for the impulsive, and the obstructed, for sane and lunatics alike . . . not only our morality but our religion, so far as the latter is deliberate, depend on the effort we can make. Will you or won't you have it so (p. 320).

In *his* talk to teachers James (1962) urges them:

See to it now . . . that you make freemen of your pupils by habituating them to act, whenever possible, under the notion of a good. Get them habitually to tell the truth, not so much through showing them the wickedness of lying as by arousing their enthusiasm for honesty and veracity. Wean them from their native cruelty by imparting to them some of your own positive sympathy with an animal's inner springs of joy (p. 94-95).

I think James' urging to the teachers is enacted in Murray Ringold's teaching. "You know," he says to Zuckerman, "I was a professional, a schoolteacher, reading books, teaching Shakespeare, making you kids diagram sentences and memorize poetry and appreciate literature, and I thought no other kind of life was worth living" (p. 134). And Murray's last lesson will help Zuckerman *and the reader* understand the motives for Zuckerman's failure. Paradoxically, Zuckerman's success as a novelist derives in part from his English teacher, Murray Ringold, even as Zuckerman's acknowledgement of his social failure derives in part from Murray's last lesson.

Murray's emphasis on critical thinking serves not to discover the answer but to commit to the question. It was in town and down the road from the home to which he had retreated from the world that Zuckerman again comes upon Murray Ringold who, at the age of ninety, had enrolled at an elder hostel hosted at Athena College. One night, after Zuckerman had picked Murray up for their evening get-together on Zuckerman's front porch, he notes that Murray had been writing a short assigned paper. Murray was still learning. Zuckerman comments,

I shouldn't have been surprised at his mental energy, even by his enthusiasm for the three-hundred-word writing assignment . . . that the professor had given his elderly students. Yet that a man so close to oblivion should be preparing homework for the next day, educating himself for a life that had all but run out—that the puzzle continued to puzzle him, that clarification remained a vital need—more than surprised me . . . (p. 151).

The ultimate teacher, Murray even at ninety years old continues to seek out an answer to his question. Nathan Zuckerman had long retired from that quest.

As Murray narrates the story of his brother, Ira Ringold, Murray portrays life as the unfathomable intricacy of human motive and action that people attempt to simplify, categorize and dismiss, even as in the schools today education is reduced to the results on standardized tests and prescribed curricula. At least, this is what Murray's story about Ira comes to mean to Nathan Zuckerman, Murray's student. "What is it all about, Alfie?" Murray's last lesson suggests to Zuckerman that really nobody knows what it is all about. Murray confesses to Zuckerman that Eve Frame, his brother Ira's wife who had published the ghost-written exposé entitled *I Married*

*a Communist*, didn't really marry a communist because to assign him this label would have been to reduce the complexity of human life to a lie. Rather, Murray says, "Eve married a man hungering after a life, but a man who could not construct one into which he could fit" (p. 319). And having heard this story in which Zuckerman played a central role— though not until this last lesson does he become wholly aware of how his life had been shaped by those early events— Zuckerman says to Ringold, as if talking to the teacher, "It's all error . . . Isn't that what you've been telling me? There's only error. *There's* the heart of the world. Nobody finds his life. That *is* life." Murray, his English teacher, now ninety years old and only several months from his death, has offered one last lesson about life to his illustrious student.

It is clear to me (who am a teacher) that Roth has designated Murray, the teacher, as the hero of this novel because it was Murray, the teacher, who had remained committed to life in his teaching. Despite the implications of this last lesson, Murray had continued to keep on keeping on. Murray's commitment to his teaching saved neither his students, nor Newark, nor himself because in this life there is no connection between intention and result. "What's it all about, Alfie?" Philip Roth's Zuckerman responds that he has learned that "It's all about nothing." It is what Vladimir and Estragon state at the play's opening: "Nothing to be done." But Murray Ringold, the teacher, suggests that life is not about nothing though that sometimes nothing might be its apparent yield. Rather, the teacher had committed himself to assist the helpless Pozzo *here* and *now* because the here and now is all he can ultimately control. And it is Murray's presence in this book as a teacher that offers Zuckerman this last lesson even though his now-famous student will not act on what he has learned. Down here, where everything matters, it can *seem* that it isn't about anything—in response to this uncertainty Zuckerman has run away from life.

I had chucked everything with which I no longer wish to contend, everything but what was needed to live on and to work with. I set out to receive all my fullness from might once have seemed, even to me, not nearly enough and to inhabit passionately only the parts of speech (p. 321).

Zuckerman had retreated from life only to write in his books about that failure. He is not his own hero: at first almost embarrassed by Murray's continued pursuit of the question, Zuckerman soon retreats back into his reserve: "But then the sense of error vanished, There were no more difficulties I wished to create" (p. 151). Unlike his teacher who had never ceased to search out the complexity that the question demanded, Zuckerman had given up.

And despite Zuckerman's resistance, Murray's last lesson as a teacher continues to have effect. Zuckerman says,

We could have sat on my deck for six hundred nights before I heard the entire story of how Murray Ringold, who'd chosen to be nothing more extraordinary than a high school teacher, had failed to elude the turmoil of this time and place and ended up no less a historical casualty than his brother. This was the existence that America had worked out for him—and that he'd worked out for himself by thinking, by taking *his* revenge on his father by cri-ti-cal think-ing, by being reasonable in the face of no reason . . . This was what adhering to his convictions had got him, resisting the tyranny of compromise. *If there's any chance for the improvement of life, where's it going to begin if not in the school.* Hopelessly entangled in the best of intentions, tangibly, over a lifetime,

committed to a constructive course that is not an illusion, to formulations and solutions that will no longer wash (p. 318).

It is only the intentions that Murray could control and not their consequences over which he had none that derives Murray's dignity and heroism.

It is this realization that constitutes part of the teacher's last lesson—ones intentions may be admirable but they do not govern events. Murray's story teaches Zuckerman that

You control betrayal on one side and you wind up betraying somewhere else. Because it's not a static system. Because it's alive. Because everything that lives is in movement. Because purity is petrification. Because purity is a lie . . . you're urged on by five hundred things. Because without the pole of righteousness . . . without the big lie of righteousness to tell you why you do what you do, you have to ask yourself, along the way, "Why *do* I do what I do?" And you have to endure yourself without knowing (p. 318).

How do we become who we are? How do we choose our life paths? We have to endure without knowing. As teachers, in the classroom we act but we cannot know the ends of our actions. Nobody knows. "And you have to endure yourself without knowing." This stance constitutes the heroic nature of the teacher. But what test anywhere would measure this knowledge? But what learning might be more valuable?

At the end of "My Pedagogic Creed" John Dewey (2009) writes (in a language that Murray Ringold will echo almost one hundred years later):

Every teacher should realize the dignity of his calling; that he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of proper social order and the securing of the right social growth; in this way the teacher always is the prophet of the true God and the usherer in of the true kingdom of God (p. 41).

The statement surprises many who have early learned to keep separate the secular from the sacred, and Dewey's assertion shocks many who see the teacher not as a social servant set apart but as a social servant meant to do the bidding of others and preferably that of the power-elite of the present social order. But for Dewey that proper social order is not that of the present structure of power but that which derives from democracy. Dewey here secularizes the sacred and makes the sacred secular. For Dewey, religion was an expression of the social relations of the community, and as Robert Westbrook (1991) suggests, for Dewey "the kingdom of God on earth was an industrial democracy," and the prophet would be "the man who succeeds in pointing out the religious meaning of democracy" (p. 78-79). That meaning, as Dewey (1893) seems to have known even early in his professional life, rests on the idea that democracy enables us to get "truths in a natural, every-day and practical sense which otherwise could be grasped only in a somewhat unnatural or sentimental sense" (p. 8). Thus, truths are arrived at in action. For Dewey the incipient pragmatist, truth is not what one possesses but that upon which one acts. As Murray Ringold would discover, the ends are often unknown, but the intentions are significant. Dewey says,

Democracy is freedom. If truth is at the bottom of things, freedom means giving this truth a chance to show itself, a chance to well up from the depths. Democracy, as freedom, means the loosening of bonds, the wearing away of restrictions, the breaking down of barriers, of middle walls, of partitions. Through this elimination of restrictions, whatever truth, whatever reality there is in man's life, is freed to express itself (p. 8).

Knowledge is a tool by which truth can be freed, and democracy cannot exist if there be any restriction on knowledge that would prevent this freeing of truth. Democracy is then, revelation, and revelation is not a monopolistic possession of truth but a continuing process "as long as life has new meanings to unfold, new action to propose" (p. 5). For Dewey, it is the teacher-as-prophet who calls out the demands of social justice upon which democracy insists in order that revelation be ongoing! I think that Murray Ringold's advocacy of "Cri-ti-cal think-ing, the ultimate subversion," exemplifies Dewey's ideal.

Teaching, as is prophecy, is an impossible profession. It pleases no one, least of all the prophet. What Abraham Joshua Heschel (1962) says about the prophet holds equally true for the teacher: they are not like the others to whom "the moral state of society, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim; to the prophet it is dreadful" (p. 9) For the others,

So many deeds of charity are done, so much decency radiates day and night . . . standards are modest; our sense of injustice tolerable, timid; our moral indignation impermanent . . . To us life is often serene . . .

But, says Heschel, "in the prophet's eye the world reels in confusion. The prophet makes no concession to man's capacity. Exhibiting little understanding for human weakness, [the prophet] seems unable to extenuate the culpability of man" (p. 9). The teacher's role is to enable the students to engage in "the process of coming to share in the social consciousness," and who knows that "the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction" (Dewey, 1893, p. 437). The work is heroically hard. Spinoza taught and Murray Ringold enacts that understanding is a never-ending process. Spinoza writes (1955),

If the way which I have pointed out as leading to this result seems exceedingly hard, it may nevertheless be discovered. Need must it be hard, since it is so seldom found. How would it be possible, if salvation were ready to our hand, and could without great labour be found, that it should be by almost all neglected? But all things excellent are as difficult as they are rare (p. 271).

"To be a prophet," Abraham Joshua Heschel (1962) tells us, "means to challenge and to defy and to cast out fear" (p. 18). As Murray Ringold says, "If there's any chance for the improvement of life, where's it going to begin if not in the school?"

Not superman but prophet. Not martyr, but hero. The teacher.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> It is not uninteresting that in Tom Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* it is exactly the failure of the two to act that dooms them. One says to the other: "There must have been a moment when we could have done something, said something, to assert some control over our destinies." But they have lost that moment and in the end, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead.

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