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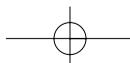
Pedagogy and the Christian Law of Love¹

LOVE IS FOUNDATIONAL for all teachers, who need a version of love that evades sentimentality and yet respects its recipients, that challenges students and yet mediates toughness with charity. The law of love expressed in the Judeo-Christian tradition helps teachers critique empty forms of love at the same time that it helps them employ productive forms of love in the classroom. We can choose love only if we humble ourselves sufficiently to look through, rather than at, the tricky lens of pride and passion and see love residing out there, beyond ego. The proper love between teachers and students, the love that Jesus commands us to most fundamentally, is neither eros nor philia but agape, which underwrites all other loves. This love offers three distinct advantages to teacherly practice: it enables us to distance ourselves from the entanglements of personality; it offers us a way of understanding the kinds of challenges we extend to our students; and it gives us a way of positioning our teaching in relation to other professional goals and activities. Teachers who rely on the energy of pedagogical passion sometimes mistakenly think that because agape operates on principle rather than on personality, it must be either cold or uninterested in individual students. However, agapic teaching can indeed be passionate, but its passions derives from a vision of the ends of good teaching and an understanding of human nature – of both teacher and student – because it stems from religious convictions that can be matched with specific Christian doctrines.

Keywords: love, agape, standards, sinfulness, teacherly practice, ends of education.

About ten years ago in a first-year writing class, I stumbled with my students into a conversation about teaching, the vividness of which remains with me today. In every first-year class I teach I try to help my students recognize and think about

1 I am indebted to Adolf Hansen of Garrett Theological Seminary, Tyron Inbody of United Theological Seminary, and Walter Reed of Emory University for giving me helpful critical readings of this article in manuscript form. I am also indebted to Jennifer Holberg of Calvin College for inviting me to work out these ideas as a conference presentation in the first place. (This article was first presented at 'Christian Scholarship . . . for What? An International Interdisciplinary Conference' at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan September 27-29, 2001.)



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different styles of pedagogy which they may encounter. On that day, however, for reasons unknown, things got personal. Not unpleasant, just personal. On that day, being a teacher talking about teaching was like being a play director talking about play production. It made my students curious to see what was behind the set. They seemed especially interested in and somewhat dubious about my claim that as a teacher I felt partly responsible for their development as human beings. More than one of them seemed convinced that as long as I possessed the appropriate credentials for teaching writing, I should not have to worry about anything else. I replied abstractly that teaching is more complicated than being professional, but this did not satisfy them. Like a litter of puppies intent on ripping up a newspaper, my students formed a collective determination to make me get specific. They insisted on knowing *why* I felt personally responsible for *their* development.

Seeing their seriousness, I got serious, too. 'Caring about you', I said, 'is the heart of my teacherly commitment. Like your parents, pastors, and peers, I am one of those people who can potentially influence you to become the kind of persons you turn out to be'. 'Clarify this', they demanded. 'What does your being a specialist in literature and writing have to do with the persons we become?' 'My teaching influences who you are and who you become', I said, 'because insofar as I persuade you to change what you know, I can't help but persuade you to change who you are. A vast portion of who you are just is a matter of what you know. Besides, I don't teach morally neutral, semi-entertaining skills like how to peel an apple in one unbroken string. I help you learn to deal with ideas and to express your views with thoughtful precision. Learning these skills makes you a different person. When your ideas change, you change. I can't ignore the fact that I play an active and guiding role in your makeover. I'm not a passive spectator.' (I was beginning to warm to the topic.) 'As a teacher I have to think hard', I said, '*not* primarily about teaching writing – I've got the skills part of this job down pat – but primarily about who *I* should be as the kind of person who will help determine the kind of persons you will be.'

So far this discussion had opened the door onto an interesting and completely unexpected topic, but I did not know that the door was about to swing back and hit me in the head. 'Okay', said a bright young woman, 'so when you ask yourself what kind of person you should be – as a teacher, I mean – what's your answer?' 'Well', I said blithely, not seeing my own words in advance, '*I think my job is to love you*'. In the slight pause that ensued, I suddenly had a vision of my own words being given a sports penalty. Ask the referee to start this play over, I thought. What are you saying? But my words continued tumbling. 'Unless I love you properly', I went on, 'I cannot teach you well. Grounding my teaching in love is the only way I can make sure that I do this job right.' The air suddenly went out of the room. A sleeping snail makes more noise than the eighteen pairs of eyes that stared at me. Feeling now like a very startled snail myself, I stared back at them. The truth is, I wasn't sure what I *meant* by what I'd just said. I did not know that I *had* a view about teacherly love until I found myself saying it.

I have never pursued this exact conversation with students again, but I am grateful that I stumbled into it that one time, however awkwardly, because my comment felt as if it came from some deep source, as if I were struggling to

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express something lying at the core of not just my professional life, but at the core of my existence. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia says to her hand maiden, Nerissa, 'I can easier teach twenty what were good to be done than to be one of the twenty to follow my own teaching'.² In what follows here, I invite you to trace my effort to be one of my own twenty – that is, to follow my own teaching – as I try to come to a better understanding of this sudden and unexpected message that came from some deep source in my teacher's heart. I believe some of the issues buried in that message are foundational for all teachers.

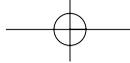
Treacle Love

The first thing I *don't* mean by loving my students is floating lazily in that swirling current of contemporary treacle which unthinkingly advances love as a mawkish, new-age answer to all human problems, as if love were like magic crystals or herbal tonics. According to a Petula Clark song still played endlessly on golden-oldie radio stations, 'What the world needs now is love, sweet love. That's the only thing that there's just too little of.' On the contrary, this is just the kind of love there is too much of. I agree with the novelist, Michael Blumenthal, who fumes about a 'Love Letter and Thank You Note' that a young colleague of his wrote to her students when she was departing Blumenthal's university. In Blumenthal's account, his colleague in her farewell note 'declared her devotion to what she described as "student-centered, relation-based teaching", and attributed her own, self-described success . . . to the fact that she "love[s] [her] students"'. The colleague claimed to love her students because 'I saw such inspiring, fragile, invincible, vulnerable beauty in them . . . the same kind of beauty I see in the just-about-to-fall spring petals on the trees'.³

Blumenthal nearly retches in response to this treacle love, and is moved to say to students in his farewell letter, 'And now, my young friends . . . let me make a terrible confession: I do not love you. . . I love my son and my close friends . . . but I was not brought here – your former professor's mushy rhetoric notwithstanding – to love you, but, rather, to teach you.' But here's the point at which my sympathy with Blumenthal's gag reflex gets complicated, for while I also reject pedagogical sentimentality, I don't want to retreat to the position which he now takes, and which my students ten years ago took: the instrumentalist position that my teacherly job is to teach professional content only, not to care about my students as persons. Despite its dangers, 'love' is for me the only word that captures my deepest sense of what it means to desire for other persons not what they may want, but what is best for them, measured by the distance between what they are and what they might become. But the helium-light love of pop songs and new-age vapors fails to give me any traction. I need a notion of love that has less to do with feeling gushy and more to do with behaving coherently. In short, I need a version of love that contains *standards*.⁴ Christian

2 Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, I, ii, 14-15.

3 Blumenthal, Michael, 'A Letter to My Students' in *Chronicle of Higher Education* Section B (August 17, 2001) p. 5.



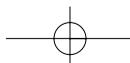
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insights offer me assistance, for the necessity of standards has everything to do with Christian love.

The Law of Christian Love

The Judeo-Christian law of love is profoundly different from the triviality of Hallmark cards, new-age 'spirituality', and TV sound bites. The Christian notion of love strikes out at once for deep water. Christianity views love not as a feeling, or not just a feeling, but as a standard of conduct. For Christians, love may sometimes be a matter of how you feel, but it's always a matter of what you do. Love is Christians' most fundamental standard of behavior; they consider themselves made and judged by its law. Jesus articulates the law of love in *Matthew 22:36-40* – 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind' – as 'the first and greatest commandment'. He also adds, 'and the second [commandment] is like unto [the first], Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'.⁵ Finally, Jesus offers an even more stringent formulation of the law of love in *John 15:12* when he says, 'This is my commandment, that ye love one another *as I have loved you*' (emphasis added). Now this commandment is different from 'love thy neighbor as thyself'. The commandment to love one another *as I have loved you* challenges what is most difficult: to overcome our natural inclination toward rationalization and self-love in favor of a love for others that attempts to model itself on Christ's love for humanity.⁶ Jesus's Passion and his

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- 4 The necessity of living with standards, in the absence of which there is no living at all that we could call fully human, forces us to make judgments all the time about who knows worst, better, and best, and who *does* worst, better, and best. Moreover, when practicality forces us to make these judgments, we not only make them but we often make them in extremely thoughtful ways, with our justifications, evidence, and rationales well in order. We may not always enjoy applying standards – I don't even like being gruff to my terrier when she's being obnoxious – but whether we are analyzing baby formula for potential pathogens, making tenure and promotion decisions, deciding whether a foul has been committed in some sport, considering whom to elect to the presidency, or just checking up to see if the kids have done their chores, we not only cannot live without standards but we don't apologize for them. The danger that those who have the power to enforce standards may be, and often have been, wrong, prejudiced, self-privileging, oppressive, or cruel is a clear and present danger. But teachers who think that some sugary act of 'love' lets them off the hook for holding standards that may temporarily make students feel 'unloved' simply misunderstand the essence of the educational process, which, as the etymology of the word 'education' suggests – from *educare*, meaning to 'lead out' – requires that those who know more lead those who know less.
- 5 A formulation he had already offered the rich young ruler in *Matthew 19:19*.
- 6 Although the commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves does challenge egoism, we can still find wiggle room in it for not loving our neighbor to the point of actual self-sacrifice, for we can always say that we are too generous to want anyone to love us in denial of their own interests. Saying this sounds good, but this



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Cross, both as facts and symbols, confront us with a commandment not only to give up that which we are most loath to yield, namely our self-interest, our self-protection, and, most of all, our self-love, but, on certain occasions, to face the prospect of sacrificing our own interests for those of others.

When I say that what we are most loath to yield is self-love, I refer to that predilection which Christianity views as the aboriginal human sin: the kind of self-love which induces human beings to deny their sinful nature, a self-love which persistently (mis)leads us to explain our destructive and cruel conduct as the consequence of forces and agents other than, to adapt a line from a Wordsworth sonnet, 'the gliding of our own sweet will'.⁷ We say, for example, following Plato's analysis, that we do evil things because of our finiteness, weakness, and ignorance,⁸ but that as soon as we find the proper educational cure for weak ignorance, then we will stop behaving wickedly. But Plato's belief that wickedness is just a form of ignorance blinds him to human perversity, and, in his blindness, prevents him from giving any deep account of it. If education and knowledge could cure wickedness, we'd have found a way to school ourselves into virtuous conduct long before now. Or we say that we do evil things because of our lower nature – the lustful and irrational demands of the body – but that as soon as we find the proper educational cure for bodily importunities, perhaps by developing our minds or by mortifying the flesh, then we will cease doing wicked deeds. St. Paul pays eloquent testimony in Romans 7:19-24 to the typical human tendency to attribute our wickedness to 'the sin that dwelleth in me', as if sin forcibly breaks down the gates of our better nature, when the truth is that we often open the gates to the city all too willingly. Or we say that we do evil not because we really want to but because we are forced to do so by necessity, perhaps 'national security', defense of 'our way of life', and so on.⁹ Citing the public good is a chilling way to justify doing evil deeds on a massive scale,

kind of comment is really more self-serving than generous, for what follows from pretending to reject *others'* self-sacrifice for us is that we let ourselves off the hook for sacrificing *ourselves* for them. The commandment to love one another '*as I have loved you*', however, cuts out the wiggle room, for Christ does indeed love humanity to the point of, and, indeed, on the other side of, self-sacrifice.

- 7 Wordsworth, William, 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', l. 12.
- 8 Plato's texts say in many different places that evil derives from ignorance. For a typical passage of this sort, see *Republic* 585 b-e.
- 9 This is the archetypal 'it's not my fault' excuse that Milton so deliciously parodies in *Paradise Lost* when he constructs a soliloquy of Satan's in which the Devil, conducting an imagined colloquy with Adam and Eve in his own mind before he has actually seen either one of them, says that the ruin he is about to bring on Eden is not motivated by his own malice but by the overweening necessity of state obligations. Milton's version of Satan's rationalization goes like this: 'And should I at your harmless innocence / Melt, as I do, yet public reason just – / Honor and empire with revenge enlarged / By conquering this new world – compels me now / To do what else, though damned, I should abhor'. (Book IV, ll. 388-92)

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as compared to the more limited scope of evil that we as individuals commit in everyday circumstances. Finally, we justify our destructiveness by saying that we are victimized and warped by corrupt institutions and historical social baggage, but that as soon as we reform those institutions, which we are always in the process of doing, then we will be liberated to be our 'true' selves: innocent, creative, and ever-loving.

The point to such rationalizations is their blind insistence that *we don't choose*. If we do evil but don't choose it, how can we be bad? We let ourselves off the moral hook by pretending to be *victims* who are misled into wickedness when we would really all prefer goodness. Our pretense usually rides the rails of complex and tortured rationalizations that mirror Milton's representation of Satan's serpentine movements as he begins to lead Eve to the forbidden tree: 'He leading swiftly rolled / In tangles, and made intricacies seem straight, / To mischief swift'. (Book IX, ll. 631-33)

To all of humanity's twisted and tangled rationalizations designed 'to make intricacies seem straight', as we run headlong 'to mischief swift', Christianity responds with a resounding 'humbug'. Christianity views all such rationalizations as self-induced falsehood and delusion. Christian thought recognizes that social institutions and bodily importunities and confused thinking are forces that human beings must deal with, but it also views them as inadequate explanations of why human beings choose evil rather than good. The Christian view tells us that it is our desire to give in to compulsion, rather, that leads us into evil. In the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, 'man is *not* divided against himself so that the essential man can be extricated from the nonessential. Man contradicts himself within the terms of his true essence. His essence is free self-determination. His sin is the wrong use of his freedom and its consequent destruction'. Niebuhr continues:

'The Christian estimate of human evil is so serious precisely because it places evil at the very center of human personality: in the will. This evil cannot be regarded complacently as the inevitable consequence of his finiteness or the fruit of his involvement in the contingencies and necessities of nature. Sin is occasioned precisely by the fact that man [sic] . . . pretends to be more than he is. . . . The law of his nature is love, a harmonious relation of life to life in obedience to the divine center and source of his life. This law is violated when man seeks to make himself the center and source of his own life. . . . Man, in other words, is a sinner not because he is one limited individual within a whole but rather because he is betrayed by his very ability to survey the whole to imagine himself the whole.'¹⁰

According to this view, original sin is not some nasty joke that God has played on humanity, not some built-in defect like a faulty computer chip, but is,

10 Niebuhr, Reinhold, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. 1, *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941) pp. 16-17.

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rather, bound up with the temptation to turn any virtue or strength we have into a vice or a weakness by pushing it too far or by relying on it too exclusively. We all have that self-love in our nature which spurs us to feel and frequently to proclaim that we are the center of things, sufficient to all purposes and ends. By 'in our nature', I do not refer to a *directly* inherited genetic sinfulness, but to something just as inevitable that I call *cognitive transcendence*, which we indirectly inherit as the by-product of a brain that gives us the cognitive power of continuous self-inspection. The Christian insight about original sin – about the inevitability of sinful human pride – cuts to the bone. What this insight recognizes is that our cognitive transcendence – our ability, that is, to know that we are knowers; to know that we are thinking; to know, even, that we are thinking *about* our thinking – hands to us our freedom of will, and, with that freedom, the occasion for sin and the need for redemption.

We can choose because we can think about what choices mean, and we can do this on at least three important planes. First, we can think about what choosing means with respect to the integrity of ourselves as choosers. Second, we can think about the consequences for others of our choices. Third, we can think about whether our choices might violate or embrace the law of love. Whether we do think on these three planes is another issue, but the fact that we can means that when we don't we are also making a choice. Self-love germinates in the soil of our self-satisfied sense that our freedom of choice places us in control of our lives and makes us self-sufficient. We mistake our capacity for cognitive transcendence, which we really do possess, with our desire for independent existential completeness, which we can never possess. 'What a piece of work is man!', says Hamlet. 'How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty, in form and moving how express and admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god – the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals!'¹¹ The Christian response to these words is that if sinful humanity ever hopes to save itself from the sin of pride, it must stop believing its own propaganda. We who write the press releases about our own goodness cannot be trusted to tell the truth. However, we really can choose love if only we humble ourselves sufficiently to look through, rather than at, the tricky lens of pride and passion and see love residing out there, beyond ego. When we look *at* that lens we only see our own reflection; when we look *through* it we see realities that lie far beyond our subjective self. In we give up our habit of living by evasions, fantasy, and rationalization, we really can choose to walk the path of love '*as I have loved you*'. Either free will puts that choice in our hands or it is not free will.

The Law of Love in Relation to Pedagogy

But what does '*as I have loved you*' actually mean for teachers? The book of *James* gives one answer to this question, a scary answer: 'Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness'.¹² This injunction brings into hard focus the need for

11 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, II, ii, 293-297.

12 *James* 3:2, Revised Standard Version, 1953.

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teachers to choose carefully the kind of love, or whatever other ultimate value they select, upon which they found their pedagogy. My concern is to understand as fully as possible how the commandment to love others ‘*as I have loved you*’ translates into teacherly attitudes and teacherly conduct.

It will help our quest if we try to sort out different kinds of love more precisely. Traditional taxonomies of different loves consistently distinguish among *agape*, *eros*, and *philia*.¹³ All three of these loves – *agape*, the steadfast love of God and neighbor; *eros*, the love of preferential desire; and *philia*, the love shared by friends – play a role in everyone’s life at some point, but only one of them is the grounds of all other kinds of love, and only one of them can guide teachers toward consistently productive relations with students. Among these three, *eros* cannot describe the proper love between teachers and students, for *eros* refers to appraisal love, a love, that is, which appraises the value of a thing and then *desires* it. While teachers may have desire on *behalf* of their students, they do not, in any proper relationship, desire their students as such. Students are not our other half.¹⁴ Nor does *philia* describe the proper kind of love between teacher and student, for the love of friends is the love of equals, and while all of us, including teachers and students, possess equality in some elemental sense as fellow human beings, students and teachers are not equal in their relations as students and teachers. Students are not our friends – they are not our equals in the way our friends are – for students are our charges, our responsibility. They may become our friends when they cease being our students, but as long as they remain our students we owe them a kind of love that relieves them of the responsibility of tending to our needs as we tend to theirs – a responsibility we cannot relieve our real friends of – in the interest of helping them travel the distance between what they are and what they might be. When Jesus commanded his disciples, and by extension commands us, to love one another ‘*as I have loved you*’, the love he commands us to most fundamentally is, then, neither *eros* nor *philia*, but *agape*, which underwrites the other loves. In the words of the theologian Tim Jackson,

“*Agape*” is the New Testament Greek word for the steadfast love God has for human beings, as well as for the neighbor-love humans are to have for one another . . . [*Agape* is characterized by three interpersonal features: (1) unconditional commitment to the good of others, (2) equal regard for the well-being of others, and (3) passionate service open to self-sacrifice for the sake of others. The first feature is suggested by the steadfastness of God’s covenant with Israel and the graciousness of God’s gift of the Messiah; the second feature reflects the inclusiveness and attentiveness of Jesus’s practice of

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- 13 C. S. Lewis, among others, also includes a fourth love – *storge*, which Lewis calls ‘affection’ – but while this love is certainly relevant to the present discussion, it is not central and I will not deal with it here.
- 14 See Aristophanes’s myth about love as the search for our other halves in Plato’s *Symposium*.

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neighbor-love; and the third feature follows, at a respectful distance, the example of Golgotha/Calvary . . . [With regard to this third feature,] I do not make actual sacrifice essential to every expression of *agape*. Openness to it under the right circumstances, however, I do take to be definitive of the virtue.¹⁵

At last, I seem to have discovered what I might have meant by my assertion to my students that my role as a teacher is to love them properly. As I have already confessed, I was muddled about what I meant at that time, and if anyone had suggested that what I meant possessed a religious idea at its core, I would have been flabbergasted. Be that as it may, I now think that I was awkwardly trying to articulate the Christian notion of *agape*. In Christian terms, to love my students '*as I have loved you*', demands that I relate to them according to the three features of *agape*: first, to be unconditionally committed to their good; second, to have regard for the well-being of all of them equally; and, third, to be open to the possibility of self-sacrifice on their behalf, when and if appropriate circumstances demand it.

Self-sacrifice is disturbing to think about. I'm sure that seeking it out is, at least most of the time, to commit the sin of pride, but I'm also sure that running from it when it is really called for violates the law of love. Jacques Maritain says that '[t]he saints and the martyrs are the true educators of mankind',¹⁶ and I see what he means, but surely saints and martyrs define the extreme upper limits of self-sacrifice. If we wait for the moments to be heroic, we may miss the homelier occasions that call for forms of sacrifice that actually lie within our everyday grasp. We do not need to wait on the occasions for martyrdom in order to say yes to *agape*-based appeals for sacrifice. When a first-year frightened about his grades shows up in my office door at 5:30 p.m. on a day when I am exhausted and ready to step out the door for home, my decision to take off my coat and invite him in for a consultation is a sacrifice of my comfort, a sacrifice of family time, and perhaps a sacrifice of my research and writing as well, but, as long as I offer that sacrifice without either grudging it on the one hand or taking excessive pride in it on the other hand, it is also an expression of *agape*. If I can remain true to the law of love on such homely and unheroic occasions as these, I will leave martyrdom to others for as long as I am able, hopefully for a life time.

Insofar as I apply the demands of *agape* to my everyday teacherly functioning, doing so grounds me in a stance that helps me avoid the temptation to stroke my own ego ('No one knows this material better than I do!'), the temptation to manipulate my students to stroke my ego ('How they adore me!'), and the temptation to assess my worth and success primarily by criteria that have little or nothing to do with providing proper care to my students' needs ('I may

15 Jackson, Timothy, *Love Disconsolated: Meditations on Christian Charity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 11-15.

16 Maritain, Jacques, *Education at the Crossroads*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, (1943) 1971) p. 25.

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not be the world's best teacher, but I published three articles this year!"). In Tim Jackson's words again, 'Christianity equates *agape* with uplifting others to their supernatural origin and end, in ways more primitive than eros and more profound than either justice or friendship . . . *Human sanctity precedes personal dignity*, in the sense that creatures' impersonal needs and passive potentials, engaged by *agape*, come before their meritorious actions and mutual enjoyments'. (Jackson's emphasis)¹⁷

Having come to comparative clarity – I certainly do not claim ultimate clarity – about what teacherly love of students might mean, let me point out three distinct advantages it offers to teacherly practice. First, taking *agape* as the foundation of my pedagogy enables me to distance myself from the entanglements of personality – those entanglements of personal likes and dislikes – that can corrupt teacher/student relations with both petty and fiery emotions. As a teacher committed to *agape*, I have to love even the students I don't like, and *agape* prohibits me from ever excusing a deteriorating relationship with a student by merely saying that 'he and I have a personality conflict'. It may be true that we have a personality conflict, but this is irrelevant to my proper teacherly functioning. As a committed *agapist*, I owe *all* my students – and I owe all of them *equally* – the same kind of care. From this perspective it does not matter which students I am fond of or not, which students appreciate or fail to appreciate my efforts, students are more or less socially cultivated, or which students are like or unlike me in terms of shared tastes and habits. The Christian version of *agape* tells me that all my students are children of God, or, to put it in naturalistic terms, they are all human beings, and as human beings I owe *all* of them the same quality of care that I give to any one of them. If they were my friends, I would expect them to return my care – this is the duty and joy of the love that is *philia* – but *agape* is the love that bestows worth regardless of reciprocity. As Tim Jackson puts it, in an agapic relationship, 'reciprocity is not a prerequisite and unilateral or unrecognized giving is often the norm. . . . *Agape* wants communion, to be sure, but it first promotes the other as such'.¹⁸ As a committed *agapist*, I must promote the good and the well-being of the other in the person of my students *as such*.

Second, *agape* offers me a way of understanding the kinds of challenges I extend to my students, as well as my proper attitude in extending these challenges. If my task as a strong agapist is to promote the good and the well-being of my students as such, it follows that I am obliged to be kind but it does not follow that I have to be easy pickings for student entreaties to go easy on them because, as they sometimes argue, they have other classes, busy social lives, or problems with room mates. *Agape* gives me no reason not to criticize a bad job as a bad job merely to avoid hurting a student's feelings. I am sorry when students are hurt by my giving them a lower grade than they wanted, but I'm not very sorry, frankly, for I know that I hurt them worse, *and* I violate my care for their well-being, if I fail to hold them to standards that help them grow. Teachers

17 Jackson (1999) p. 90.

18 Jackson (1999) pp. 81-82.

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must never let their commitment to excellence deteriorate into knee-jerk mean-spiritedness, but, barring this deterioration, *agape* helps me look through the confusion of my own emotional softness to the kind of responsibility that I and my students must both be tough enough to accept if we are both to avoid forming habits of evasion and rationalization that can last a life time.

Third, the perspective provided by *agape* gives me a way of positioning my teaching in relation to other professional goals and activities. *Agape* as the ultimate Christian standard of conduct is not much interested in the status of my professional prestige, in the size of my salary, or in the numbers of books, articles, and honors that appear on my resume. I cast no contempt or discredit on any of these facets of professional life. They all have their proper places of concern. However, when professionalism is approached from the standpoint of *agape*, concern about prestige, salary, and publications become secondary. Although important, they can never become all-important, and there is a great liberation in knowing this. Liberation does not come from supposing that *agape* relieves me of the obligation to be as highly accomplished and as wide-ranging a professional as I can be – I must still pursue excellence – but it comes, instead, from the sense of having my life aligned with more elemental, enduring, and profound truths about human flourishing than when I am consumed with an ego-centered concern about my own professional success or consumed with envy at others' professional success. When I succeed in hanging that first piece of wall paper absolutely plumb or in making a picture frame with perfect right angles, I feel that I have aligned myself with universal constants – a plumb line and a right angle will be the same everywhere, at least in our universe, like the speed of light – and when I succeed in ordering my professional life according to the standard of *agape*, I feel that I have aligned my interests and concerns with truths of existence, as Wordsworth says in one of his great odes, that 'give thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears'.¹⁹

Passionate Teaching: *Agape* vs. *Eros* and *Philia*

I must confess, however, that many teachers resist the view I am advancing here. They reject my claim that pedagogical energy and teacher/student relations should be dominated by *agape*. Many teachers prefer the energy of *eros* over what they view – mistakenly, I think – as the milk toast blandness of *agape*. I regularly direct pedagogy seminars for faculty both at my own university and at Emory University, and intermittently as a consultant at other universities. One of the most persistent values I find among teachers is a deep intuition backed up by experience that much, perhaps most, good teaching relies on the teacher's *passion*. In *What Is Art*, Leo Tolstoy persistently uses the metaphor of *infection* to account for the power of art to recreate in an auditor's mind and heart the same emotions contained in the work of art itself. Many teachers rely implicitly on this metaphor of infection to explain their best teaching. They have the sense that good teaching is infectious and that the agent of infection is passion. The pedi-

19 Wordsworth, William, 'Ode: Intimations of Immortality' (1807), l. 205.

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gree for the value of pedagogical passion is distinguished. It goes all the way back to Plato's *Phaedrus*, at least, where Socrates describes the infectious effect of that philosopher/teacher who comes to students fresh from his or her communion with beauty: 'At first a shudder runs through [the student]', says Socrates, 'and again the old awe steals over him; then looking upon the face of his beloved [teacher] as of a god he reverences him. . . . During this process the whole soul is all in a state of ebullition and effervescence'.²⁰ It's as if the soul in its spasms of learning grows wings, says Socrates.

Well, this is indeed hot stuff, unabashedly erotic, and it's not only a vision of teaching that is difficult for teachers to resist, but it's a vision of teaching that works. All of us know that when students have a deep personal feeling for their teachers, they tend to get hot for the teacher's subject as well. Loving the teacher puts students in the way of loving the subject, and many teachers rely on erotic energy in the classroom to make their subjects compelling. In a chapter of *Teaching to Transgress* called 'Eros, Eroticism, and the Pedagogical Process', bell hooks asserts the teacher's need to understand that 'eros is a force that enhances our overall effort to be self-actualizing, that it can provide an epistemological grounding informing how we know what we know, enables both professors and students to use such energy in a classroom setting in ways that invigorate discussion and excite the critical imagination'.²¹

This is precisely the position advocated in a recent *Harper's* article by Christina Nehring, subtitled 'Bringing Eros Back Into Academe'. In this article, Nehring stoutly maintains that

'knowledge is unremittingly personal: the best students fall in love with teachers; the most engaged teachers respond strongly – and variously – to students. . . . When a student has a crush on a teacher, it is a powerful and productive thing: she or he works much harder, listens far more voraciously, appropriates, in many cases, the teacher's intellectual enthusiasms. The student becomes a sponge for knowledge. When a teacher has a weakness for even one student in a lecture hall, the whole class benefits: she or he speaks with far greater care, switches from autopilot to real-think mode, and (with luck) even looks forward to reading papers.'²²

In this same vein, a graduate colleague of mine now at another university, upon reading a draft of this paper, challenged my argument in the following terms. 'In my experience of the pedagogical relationship', he says, 'the 'fiery emotions' of eros and philia are somehow still central, dynamic elements in the

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- 20 Plato, *Phaedrus*, Trans. Benjamin Jowett, *Great Books of the Western World*. Vol. 7. Ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins.(Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) pp. 115-41 (pp. 126-127).
- 21 hooks, bell, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 195.
- 22 Nehring, Cristina, 'The Higher Yearning: Bringing Eros Back to Academe' in *Harper's Magazine* CCCIII.1816 (September 2001) pp. 64-72 (pp. 71, 69)

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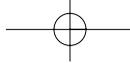
mix. In relational and emotional terms teaching is for me an incredibly, yes, disturbingly promiscuous activity, if I may use that word. I feel myself surrounded by *potential* friends and lovers; or to put it another way, feel myself *aspiring* to be friends or lovers of them all. Of course I know perfectly well that in the vast majority of cases there will be no such outcome. But knowing that doesn't seem to undercut the charged and irrational 'erotics' of the pedagogical situation. . . . My 'erotic' account explains this: pedagogy takes off when an individual student discovers for him/herself an erotic or philial bond with the teacher'.²³

It is certainly the case that modern depictions of student/teacher relationships on TV and in movies support people's intuitions that erotic and philial models of teaching are not only natural but best. Picking a few popular movies more or less at random, we can see that Glen Ford in *Blackboard Jungle*, Sidney Poitier in *To Sir, With Love*, Robin Williams in *Dead Poets' Society*, Michelle Pfeiffer in *Dangerous Minds*, Michael Caine in *Educating Rita*, and Danny de Vito in *Renaissance Man*, movies tend to repeat contemporary culture's prejudices in favor of passion, passion, passion, always manifested as variants of either *eros* or *philia*, and often as both.²⁴ My elevation of *agape* as the model of love among teachers and students receives a powerful challenge from such arguments about the primacy of *eros* and *philia*. However, despite the eloquence and fervency, even, of these testimonials, and despite my agreement that passion – a certain *kind* of passion – is indeed a most useful facilitator of good teaching, I remain convinced that the appropriate passion in student/teacher relations is not erotic passion, or even the passion of friendship (even *potential* friendship), but *agape*.

It is not necessary, I hope, to defend from charges of lechery those many teachers who prefer erotic or friendship approaches to teaching. The issue for such teachers is seldom some crude version of sexual exploitation. This happens occasionally and when it does none of us is deeply confused about how to assess it. What *is* deeply confusing, and what is at stake, however, is the extent to which a *kind* of erotic energy, not necessarily a sexual outcome, is either necessary to or at least conducive to good teaching and learning. In my view this confusion can be sorted out in such a way as to preserve the highest value I have placed on *agape*. The confusion arises, I think, from the value that many teachers place on pedagogical *passion* and on their deep intuition that the infectiousness of what they teach can be transferred to students *only* through the medium of passion. These teachers place such a value on *passion* in teaching that they cannot imagine an effective pedagogy without it, and – here is where they commit their logical fault, I think – they find it much easier to identify *all* passion, pedagogical or otherwise, with *eros* rather than *agape*. To such teachers *agape* seems bloodless, perhaps even cold, and not very interesting. And I concede that *agape* is disinterested; it operates on principle; to some

23 Unpublished letter.

24 The only notable exceptions I recall are the two versions of *The Browning Version*, one made with Michael Redgrave in the fifties and the remake with Albert Finney in the nineties.

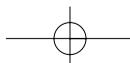


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extent *agape* flattens out the individual differences among students in the interest of equal treatment and other-regarding care for them all.

But because agape is disinterested does not mean that it is either cold or uninterested in individual students. What *agape* flattens out are precisely those high points of individual attraction that make me want to respond to some students more positively than to other students. What *agape* does not flatten out is the passion for caring and concern that teachers can extend to their students *as such*, not because John is handsome and smart and reverences my knowledge, and not because Michelle is robustly intellectual and enjoys the camaraderie of give and take with me, but because Michelle and John are both human beings, children of God, and deserve my caring and concern on these grounds alone. They would deserve my caring and concern on these grounds alone even if John were handsome but dumb and even if Michelle were sullen and obtuse. Nehring reminds us that when a student has a crush on a teacher he or she works harder, reads more, and learns more, and that teachers who have crushes on students improve their performance as well. This may be true in some cases. I do not deny that it is possible. But I do deny that it is necessary. I would remind Nehring, and all of us, that it is sometimes possible to do the right things for the wrong reasons. It seems to me that teachers who rely on or exploit the very real potential for erotic energy between themselves and students run a real risk of relying on or exploiting the wrong mechanism to support the right thing: good teaching.

Agape offers just as much grounds for passionate teaching – from the teacher's perspective – as does *eros*, but *agapic* teaching is grounded on a different vision of the *ends* of good teaching than the vision that grounds erotic teaching. Erotic or philial teaching cannot escape a vision of learning which starts with and depends on the student wanting to be like the teacher. *Eros* enfolds. *Agape* bestows. Teaching based on erotic energy invites too little cultivation of the student's need to become like himself or herself, not like the teacher. I'm well aware of the value of models and the role of imitation in learning, but adopting as a model and imitating the practice of a teacher toward whom the student feels an erotic interest, or vice versa, runs the risk of become a model and a practice that smothers, not cultivates, the student's growth toward autonomy. Now if intensely personal relationships were the only means by which passion could ever enter the teaching/learning transaction, cultivating it might be worth the risk. But I can get passionate about a vision of my students' growth as independent persons, and I don't have to feel an erotic charge in order to feel that passion. The vision of my students becoming fully themselves in their own right is a riveting and inspiring vision, and I don't have to be erotically charged in order to have it. Nor do my students have to be my friends in order for me to wish the fulfillment of this vision on their behalf. The proper end of teaching is to lead our students toward autonomy – not an ultimate existential autonomy that sinfully views the individual as self-sufficient – but toward the kind of autonomy that allows the individual to see his or her needs in relation to his or her own situation. The reverencing of teachers which Socrates describes in the *Phaedrus*, which bell hooks advocates in *Teaching to Transgress*, and which Nehring describes in *Harper's* invites students to see their needs or to understand themselves not autonomously, but in light of their



teacher's passions and predilections.

Instead of being deeply gratified when we I see this reverence sprouting wings on the souls of my students, I see it as a potential problem that can undermine both my teaching and their learning. It's not that I am too pure to be tempted by the ego gratification that such reverence offers, and it's not that I haven't been sometimes guilty of indulging myself in that gratification – the enjoyment of being loved by certain students because I know that they want to be like me and want to know what I know – but I also know that to give in to this temptation will make me less clear about *agape's* true commitment, on the one hand, to the caring and concern of my students as such, and also will make me less clear, on the other hand, about the temptations to self-pride that might lead me to substitute my good opinion of *myself* for a principled assessment of what my students need for *themselves*.

Conclusion: *Agape* as Act vs. *Agape* as Belief

Some of my readers may wonder why I felt it necessary to precede my analysis of *agape* with Christian considerations of such issues as sin, guilt, repentance, and so on. Some of my teacher readers may want to ask, 'Why can't I just concentrate on love?' However, the Christian notion of *agape* cannot be separated from Christian notions of human sinfulness. The Christian insight is that love does not exist for the easy picking, that aligning our conduct with *agape* requires us to understand our own nature. Endlessly invoking our belief in 'love, sweet love' will solve no problems. We cannot fully grasp *agape* until we perform the critical act of dropping our pride, but since pride is a natural part of our constitution, a consequence of our cognitive transcendence, it is unlikely that we will drop pride out of a general instinct for benevolence or the generic desire to teach well.

We will never give up pride without *repenting* the occasions on which pride has led us to hurt or damage others. The garden of Eden story, like most great stories, says something profoundly true, and what it says is that pride dissolves the cohesiveness of creation. The crucifixion story, another great story, also says something profoundly true, and what it says is that love strengthens (and can even heal and rebuild) cohesiveness. When we commit the sin of pride we must repent the damage we have done to creation. We must see and admit *to* ourselves and *before* creation's author the damage we have done. Repentance is necessary because it puts us back in alignment with truth. Wishing to concentrate on love alone without thinking about sin and repentance is like wishing for a ball to roll up a hill by itself without acknowledging that what the ball wants to do is cooperate with the natural force of gravity pulling it down. In order to concentrate on love we must acknowledge our natural tendency to cooperate with the force of pride that pulls us not upward toward love but down and away from it. In short, we must concentrate on *agape*.

Human beings always shape the world according to the nature and content of their ultimate faith, whatever that faith may be. For the Christian teacher, *agape*-based pedagogy will have an emotional and intellectual resonance that stems from general religious convictions that can be matched with specific Christian doctrines. For the non-Christian teacher, *agape*-based pedagogy will

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have an emotional and intellectual resonance that stems from a conviction about the value of human beings that operates like a religious conviction in that it is an ultimate article of faith, but that cannot be matched with any specific religious doctrines. One potentially significant difference between the two is that the Christian teacher will, by virtue of specific Christian doctrines, acknowledge from the outset – more so than her secular counterpart, perhaps – that *any* kind of pedagogy (*agape*-based, vocational, liberal, professional, or whatever) can be corrupted by the teacher's sinful indulgence in pride and ego. The Christian teacher knows that the temptation to accept this invitation is always present, must always be resisted, and must always be repented when yielded to.

At the end of *Paradiso*, Dante says that God 'conceives of all things in a single volume bound by Love, of which the universe is the scattered leaves'. (Canto 33) Perhaps in constructing this image Dante is thinking of *Ephesians* 2:10, where St. Paul refers to human beings as God's 'workmanship', a translation of the Greek *poiema*, which raises the interesting possibility that, as God's *poiema*, we are, perhaps, God's 'poems'.²⁵ In any event, whether I think in Dante's terms of the universe as God's book of love or extrapolate St. Paul's 'workmanship' into a vision of persons as God's poems, both images, to a book and a poem lover such as I, combine many connotations that move me deeply: the connotations of learning, of pleasure, of knowledge, of beauty, of unity, of coherent construction, of goodness, and, ultimately, of that profoundly unspeakable yet curiously knowable love from which all these other goods derive their energy. Dante's is a vision of *agape* at its highest and purest level. To us, to the everyday teachers of everyday students, neither of whom is writing the book of the universe but who both have their fullest life only when they align themselves with its truths, working out our own commitment to and our own vision of *agape*, in however homely or personal a form, is a life long task that both guides us in our teaching endeavors and honors those endeavors at the same time.

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25 I am indebted to Walter Reed of Emory University for bringing *poiema* to my attention.

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