

## ***The Teacher***

*...teaching is, after all, a form of show business.*

Steve Martin

At the time of this interview Mr. Katzev was living in an apartment overlooking a park in a gentrified neighborhood of Portland, Oregon. I spoke with him in his study, lined with bookshelves and artwork that reflected his love of all things Italian, especially Florentine, and beautifully calligraphed works of poetry. Mr. Katzev had recently returned from an extended stay in the tropics and looked extremely fit. His mood remained upbeat in spite of the heavy, cold rain that fell throughout the afternoon. The interviewer had previously talked with Mr. Katzev at his villa outside the town of Castelnuovo Berardenga in Tuscany. This interview reports the exchanges we had in both settings.

*Your first job was teaching, wasn't it? How did you get started in the academic world?*

When I completed graduate school in 1965, teaching was about the only career available to a doctorate then. I did a 1-year post-doc at the University of California Medical School that was more a way to live in San Francisco than anything else. But I didn't want to work in a large university and was really uncertain about what to do next. Eventually I learned of a teaching job at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. I had never been to Reed but I was aware of its reputation as place where undergraduates were serious about their studies and themselves, as well. It sounded like a utopian community and so I applied for the position. I was hired without an interview. Can you believe that? I am sure I was the last academic to be hired anywhere without an interview.

*Do you recall any teachers who might have influenced you to follow in their steps?*

Oh, yes, there were many. Mr. Walker was a teacher of literature in the high school I went to in Los Angeles. I often think of him and the huge book of literary works that we read in his class. I don't remember a single thing we read or how I ever managed to understand the readings. But I do recall that Mr. Walker touched something very much hidden from me at the time. I sensed only vaguely that he was on to something far removed from the person I was then. But now that I have come around to literature, I realize why I felt that way. He was always very kind to me, maybe even encouraged me to study literature. I don't know why I never did. Outside a course in French, where we read Proust in French, no less, I never took a formal course in literature in college. From all I know about how literature is taught these days, had I done so, I think I might never have come to love literature as much as I do now.

*How about when you went to college? Do you recall anyone who encouraged you in the same way?*

Donald Davidson was a teacher who started me down the path of becoming one myself. Davidson taught philosophy at Stanford when I was an undergraduate student. I am sure he had no idea who I was or that I was enrolled in his class on Plato, to say nothing of the major influence he exerted on my life. It was not his considerable erudition or his knowledge of Plato that so deeply affected me. Rather it was his unwavering dedication to the concept of clarity, clarity of language, meaning, and argument. The significance of this notion had never been demonstrated before me with such power. But once I began to think about it and once he began to illustrate time and time again the difference between a clear statement and one that is vague, ambiguous or confusing, I had little doubt about its importance.

Clarity, precision of thought, carefully constructed argument—it was startling to realize how far that could take you. It is said that true teaching, teaching at its best, is by example.

*“The teacher demonstrates to the student his own grasp of the material, his ability to perform the chemical experiment ..., his capacity to solve the equation on the blackboard, to draw accurately the plaster cast or living nude in the atelier.”<sup>1</sup>*

To this day, Davidson’s display of a mind at work, a mind struggling to be cogent, lucid, and logical has served as my ideal and whenever I deviate from it, which is often, I know in a flash it isn’t right. “Crystal clear” was one of his favorite expressions and now it is mine, as well. Donald Davidson died recently and when I read about his life after he left Stanford and the contributions he subsequently made to philosophy, I spent hours in silent reverie about his wonderful classes that I had the good fortune to experience over 40 years ago. I have never recovered from his class on Plato and the world of philosophical analysis that he introduced to me. Yet it wasn’t necessarily philosophy that I learned from him. Rather it was his skill in demonstrating a philosopher-at-work and what it took to give scrupulous attention to precise statements. “Yes, I said,” “That is what I want to try to do.

*Who did you work with on your graduate dissertation?*

Benbow Ritchie was my dissertation advisor at Berkeley and he was the only one I really ever wanted to work with or ever could, for that matter. Fundamentally, he was also a philosopher, not a psychologist, at least he thought like a philosopher as I did then or liked to think I did. But at the time I knew him, he was really moving

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<sup>1</sup> George Steiner *Lessons of the Masters*.

away from psychology. He hadn't done any research for years. Instead, it was the theatre that was his true love and now that I think about it, I realize that he too was turning toward the arts. In fact, he acted in an amateur theatre group in Berkeley.

Benbow and I often had lunch together at a little café near the campus. Imagine that. I had lunch with someone. I think he must have enjoyed our conversations, although for the life of me I don't know why. Who can ever remember these things? I never saw him again after I left graduate school, although we did exchange a few letters. I know I disappointed him greatly when after offered a teaching position at a university in the East, I withdrew my acceptance as the academic year approached. He had surely written a glowing recommendation on my behalf. Later he wrote to me that my withdrawal had damaged his future credibility. But I cannot help but think he understood why I backed out for there was no rancor in the letters that we exchanged a few years later.

Benbow knew how to ask questions and how to see the flaws in one's reasoning and I admired that greatly. He kept me on my toes and helped me to complete my dissertation relatively quickly, once I finally got going. The summer was approaching and he wanted me to finish before he headed off to his summer home on Rhodes. And after I had completed my oral exam, he told me that it was the best one he had ever attended or something like that. Unbelievable. And as I thought back about my friendship with Benbow Ritchie the other day, I wondered how he was. So I Googled his name (think of it, all you need to do to find out about someone now is to Goggle their name), sadly I learned that he had died in 1998. In a note on the Website where I read the announcement, one person had written:

*"Aside from his unusual intellectual capabilities, he was a wonderful person, a perfect gentleman gifted with wisdom and wit."*

As I think about these individuals, these influential teachers in my life, I realize how lucky I have been. Most people can be considered lucky if they have one really fine teacher in their life. And I have had several. I have also come to realize that several were really turning away from their discipline at the time I knew them. While they never conveyed that to me, I must have sensed a growing skepticism with the work they were doing. Perhaps, that is too strong. Maybe all they were saying was that there is more to a professional life than a single field of study. Of course, that is hard to do in the specialized focus of graduate school and even harder once you assume academic responsibilities. But all the while I was doing psychology, my love of literature was lurking silently underground.

*I'd like to know more about your years at Reed. Did you enjoy your years there?*

In the beginning, it was more like graduate school should have been. I mean I really had to learn the stuff and I really had to learn how to teach. You don't learn any of that in graduate school, of course. What you learn or try to learn is how to conduct research. Besides the amazing students who went to Reed, it was also a place where you could not only teach but also do research.

Moreover, it was exciting to be around the students. At the outset I was young, the youngest member of the department, and they were only slightly younger. They were intelligent, energetic, and a bit nutty, as is often the case at Reed and were also attracted by the research I was doing. If I was interested in some issue, so were they. My lab was crowded, as were my classes. Every once in a while I would return to my office in the evening, only to be sidetracked by a group of students still working in the lab. It was pretty heady stuff. Looking back on it now, it seems inconceivable--I was studying problems in animal conditioning and the students wanted to work with me.

So I tried to incorporate a research project in each of my classes, but even more important was working with the students on their Senior Thesis required of all graduates of the College. More often than not students in psychology were content to work on projects the teachers were interested in. So they were able to do some research for their Thesis and I was able to get the research done that I wanted to do. It was an ideal situation, although later I began to worry that I might have been exploiting the students as much as anything.

*Recently Philip Lopate has written an essay on being a mentor where he takes a rather dim view of serving as a mentor to his students.*

I recall reading Lopate's essay at the time I took a writing workshop from him. He titles his essay, *Terror of Mentors*, which drew me at once into the piece because I never viewed myself as a terror and I hope the students never felt that way about me either. Lopate's essay is a fine piece of psychological analysis, honest and insightful both.

Mostly he speaks of his fear especially his sexual anxiety about coming under the influence of a mentor. I thought that was unfortunate since there is so much to be gained from a relationship with a mentor. But he also speaks of his silent mentorship with the many authors he admired. At the end of the essay, he takes up his own role as a mentor for his students. For me that was always one of the great pleasures of teaching and over the years I have been fortunate to develop close intellectual and personal relationships with several students who remain good friends to this day. Lopate claims he could not truly mentor a student if he did not believe he or she was his equal. Again I felt that was unfortunate. A really good mentor can often turn a less than stellar student into an intellectual peer. It is one of the greatest joys of teaching.

*You speak so positively about being at Reed. What then led you to eventually leave the College?*

Oh, the usual reasons. In spite of the fact that I felt privileged to be there and continually amazed that I was being paid for engaging in the scholarly life I led, I became more and more disenchanted with academic life, the never-ending administrative responsibilities, the tedious committee meetings, and the faculty wrangling and politicking gradually turned me away. I also grew to dislike the increasingly tedious tasks of grading papers and preparing classes on topics that had grown all too familiar to me.

In his essay on teaching, Lionel Basney says:..."to be a teacher now means being a committeeperson, an academic politician, a conference goer, an administrator, a grant winner, a counselor."<sup>2</sup> To that I add, don't forget preparing for class, grading papers, and publishing in the leading journals. It was exhausting. And I really wasn't much in love with psychology anymore after teaching it for almost 25 years. I am sure that was reflected in my classes and departmental activities. You really have to love your work to be good at teaching. Eventually, I realized I wasn't being at all responsible to remain at the College. Fortunately, I had the resources to leave and so I did. Not every aging faculty member can do that and from time to time I wonder if I made a wise decision, after all.

I have dreams now about teaching classes at Reed. They are not happy dreams. Maybe all teachers have them from time to time. The dreams appear out of the blue. In them, I am always uncertain about what I am supposed to be talking to the class about. I am not prepared for the class. I don't know the subject matter very well. I have to teach the class and I don't know what I am going to say or how I am going to get through the hour.

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<sup>2</sup> Lionel Basney Teacher: Eleven Notes. *American Scholar*, Winter, 2002.

I stand before the class and I can sense they are aware of my quandary. I wonder what I am doing there in the first place, how did I ever get myself in this situation. It is painful and I am relieved when I finally wake. I have had this same dream quite a few times and its theme is always the same--teaching a subject that I know little about or at the beginning of class never having prepared for it.

More than anything I think the dream reflects how little I knew about some of the subjects I was teaching and how much time I had to devote to preparing my classes. Maybe I overprepared. In fact, I know I did, especially in the beginning. But even toward the end, I found myself going over and over my class notes and trying to get a handle on some of the new research on the topic. There was always new research to read and I wanted to bring that to my class, as well as to my own understanding of the subject. That is the nature of teaching a rapidly changing science and wanting to try to do it well.

*Have you read much of anything about that kind of experience or have you spoken with other teachers who have felt the same way?*

No, I don't recall any work on this experience nor have I spoken with anyone about it. But it reminds me of the novel *Stoner* by John Williams. It has to be one of the saddest novels I've ever read. Stoner is from a farming family in Missouri who enters college to learn modern agricultural techniques. Early on he is profoundly moved by a course on Shakespeare and decides to change his studies to English Literature. After completing graduate studies he becomes a teacher of English at the University of Missouri. From the beginning though it is a struggle to establish himself in the department and gain the respect of his students and colleagues. Williams says of Stoner:

*He had wanted to be a teacher, and he had become one; yet he knew, he had always known, that for most of his life he had been an indifferent one.*

In this respect, I saw a small reflection of my own life in the academic community, although in the end he did love his job and what he was trying to achieve in the classroom far more than I did.

*Do you regret not being a part of the academic community now?*

Yes, in part, I do. The recognition has come upon me slowly. More than anything I miss the students, as those I knew at Reed were bright and talented and many of them became close friends. All of that has vanished from my life now. As I said earlier, I sometimes ask myself if I erred in leaving the College when I did. I don't regret leaving *per se*, as it has allowed me to turn elsewhere in my studies. But it does take place in a more solitary setting, which, like anything else, has its own advantages and disadvantages.

*Do you continue to see your former students?*

Most of them have moved elsewhere. Sometimes I receive an e-mail from one. They write to say a nice word about the experiences we had together. Every now and then they will tell me how much they enjoyed my class and how I motivated them to take up a particular field of graduate study. One of my closest friends recently moved with his family to Israel. He writes often and once in a while asks me to help him with something he is working on. He is also a very funny guy, so we have a lot of fun e-mailing back and forth. He encourages me to come to Israel; perhaps I will do that one day. And occasionally one will return to Portland and we get together for a visit. But, by and large I never hear from most of them once they leave the College.

*Did you do any writing when you were at Reed?*

Oh, yes, I did some writing then. That is, I wrote a lot of articles for the journals in my field. Of course, that isn't usually thought of as writing. I don't know what you call it, but it wasn't much different than what I'm doing now. You try to write as well as you can, whether it is articles, essays, or works of fiction. Yes, the formats are different and they vary in imaginative content, but still you are writing, you are trying to express yourself and the world you observe as clearly and thoughtfully as possible.

*So, did you start writing more informal, personal works once you stopped teaching?*

Not right away. At first, I set up a research firm to carry out the studies I could never do at Reed. The organization was only moderately successful and so after several years, I simply stopped seeking or proposing projects. However, my work in helping to begin the first car sharing organization in this country and then evaluating its operation was clearly the most important thing I did during this time.

The car sharing concept was originally developed in Germany and Switzerland and when I first read about it, I thought it was a really promising idea that could help alleviate the growing transportation problems in this country. As it turned out it was, yes, a very fine idea and it still is, but it really has had little impact on the driving behavior of many individuals, especially those who drive the most. Still, let us say we are still in the early stages of commercial car sharing. Perhaps one day it will come to occupy a larger place for American drivers than it does now, particularly in the suburbs of the major metropolitan areas of this country, where it has virtually no presence now and where, of necessity, so much driving occurs.

*Are you doing any research or teaching now?*

No, I don't do much of either anymore. I still haven't given up the fundamental texture of my work: the questioning, the methods of reasoning and analysis. The vocabulary is still with me, as in the spirit of argument and dialogue. None of this is essential for writing. Perhaps that is part of my problem as I move from a social science to the literary arts, although I do not find the fields quite so separate as so many others do.

But my days in the classroom and the laboratory seem so very long ago, like something that happened to another person, in another time or world. Maybe I have dreamed it all. I do recall it, of course, but I must confess it is hard to believe any of it ever happened to me. I have that feeling now for many of the things I did when I was a younger person. It reminds me of a passage I recent read in Richard Bausch's *Peace*:

*His life there now seemed a hundred years ago. Or it was worse than that: sometimes, now in the nights, it felt like something he must have imagined. It no longer carried with it the weight of memory but was marbled with the insubstantial feeling of imagination when the faculty for imagining is sketchy or false. He could not really believe it happened, any of it.*

*What are you working on now?*

Mostly now I've been doing a good deal of writing about literature and the experiences I have had in reading literary fiction. The central question I keep asking myself is how has literature influenced my life. Does reading literature influence a person's life and if so how. Mostly I talk about my own experience for there's very little known about how others readers are affected. Of course, I am also doing a good deal of reading and I keep a record of the memorable passages in the books I read. I've collected them all in my commonplace book and recently carried out an analysis of the volume. I am hoping to publish the results of this

informal study, although I have been struggling to find a publisher for years and am beginning to realize searching for one is rather absurd. So I will probably publish it myself or more likely put the material on the Web, along with all the other literary essays I've written that are no more likely to find a publisher than my commonplace book analysis.